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Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization

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For the most part, scholars who study American political parties in the electorate continue to characterize them as weak and in decline. Parties on the elite level, however, have experienced a resurgence over the last two decades. Such a divergence between elite behavior and mass opinion is curious, given that most models of public opinion place the behavior of elites at their core. In fact, I find that parties in the electorate have experienced a noteworthy resurgence over the last two decades. Greater partisan polarization in Congress has clarified the parties' ideological positions for ordinary Americans, which in turn has increased party importance and salience on the mass level. Although parties in the 1990s are not as central to Americans as they were in the 1950s, they are far more important today than in the 1970s and 1980s. The party decline thesis is in need of revision.

With few exceptions (see Keith et al. 1992), the scholarly consensus on contemporary American political parties in the electorate centers on party decline. There is disagreement about its sources—whether people are more negative (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979) or neutral (Wattenberg 1984)—and about its abruptness—whether precipitous (Wattenberg 1984) or less steep but still meaningful (Konda and Sigelman 1987)—but the conventional wisdom is that parties have long been irrelevant to many. Bartels (2000) cites a litany of scholarly work that suggests party decline in the electorate will persist into the new century.¹ According to some, that trend is potentially irreversible because of the antiparty electoral changes implemented in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Aldrich 1995, 245–53; Beck 1997, 385).

The centrality of party decline in the thinking of public opinion scholars is curious, especially because Congress scholars discovered years ago that parties are resurgent on the elite level (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Rohde 1991). Since most theories of public opinion change focus on the behavior of elites (Brody 1991; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992), party resurgence in Congress should be consequential in understanding mass attitudes toward parties. Mass behavior should reflect, at least to some degree, elite behavior. Therefore, mass party strength should have increased as a result of greater partisanship at the elite level.

I will demonstrate that the measures scholars have used as evidence of mass party decline now point to party resurgence. In most cases the movement has

been extraordinary, especially in view of the glacial pace characteristic of most public opinion change. Moreover, it can best be explained by the increase in ideological polarization along congressional party lines. I will show that elite polarization has clarified public perceptions of the parties' ideological differences, which has led to a resurgence of parties in the electorate.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL EVIDENCE FOR PARTY DECLINE

Scholars have detailed party decline using data at both the aggregate and individual level, but I confine my analysis to the latter, using data collected by the National Election Study (NES). To public opinion scholars, the most familiar evidence of party decline is the rapid increase in political independence and the accompanying decrease in strong partisanship after the 1950s. The percentage of independent leaners nearly doubled between 1960 and 1980, and the percentage of strong partisans dipped by more than one-third (Wattenberg 1984).² One prominent explanation for party decline is that, in a candidate-centered era, parties have become irrelevant to many people. As evidence, Wattenberg (1984) cites a rapid increase in the percentage of Americans who are neutral toward both parties, as tapped by likes/dislikes questions in the NES survey.

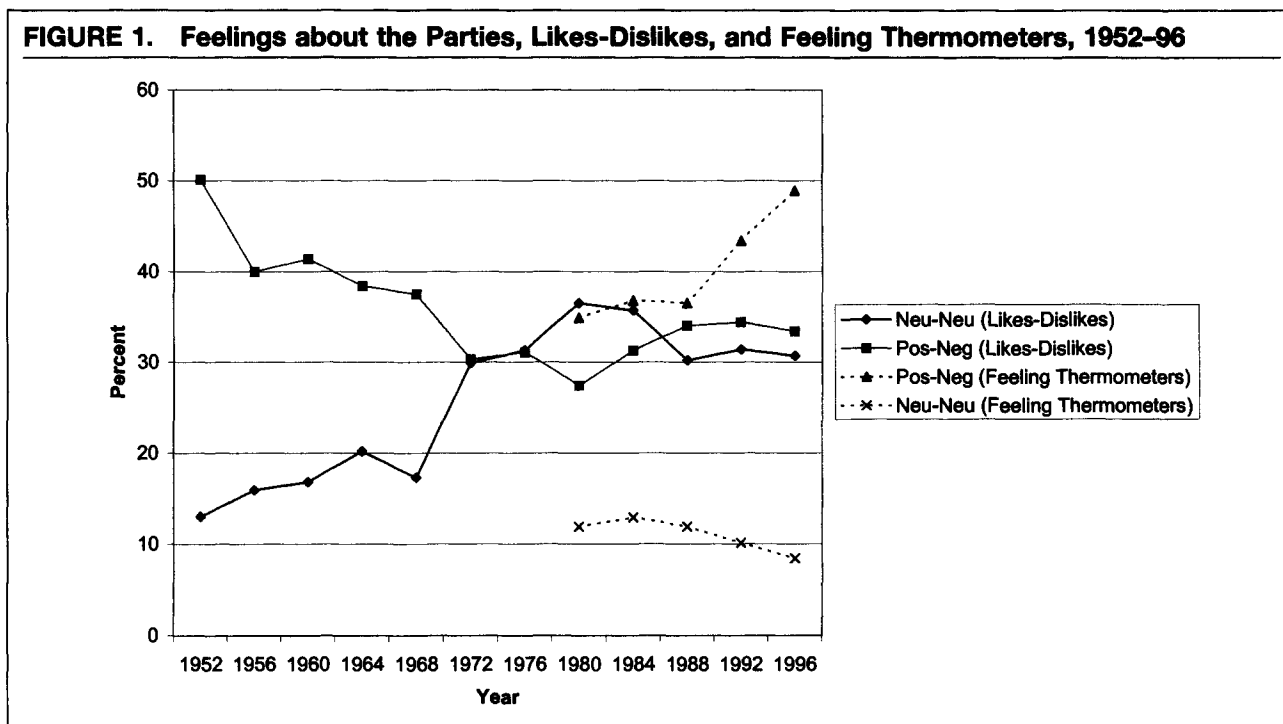
Although Konda and Sigelman (1987) express concerns about Wattenberg's measures, they find further support, albeit muted, for the neutrality thesis. They measured party engagement as the total number of party likes and dislikes provided by respondents and discovered that engagement declined substantially between 1952 and 1984. In later work, Wattenberg (1994, 1996, 1998) focuses on the Perot candidacies and argues that the parties are still in decline. An apparent indicator of major party failure is the fact that Ross Perot received more votes in 1992 than any third party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt eighty years ear-

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¹ Bartels (2000) demonstrates that party identification has an increasingly large effect on presidential and congressional vote choice and is largely alone in challenging the party decline thesis, although other public opinion scholars note the resurgence on the elite level (e.g., Aldrich 1995; Beck 1997).

² Bartels (2000) finds that these trends have reversed recently, especially among the politically active. The proportion of party identifiers among voters was higher in 1996 than in any election since 1964.



lier. In addition, split-ticket voting reached an apex for the NES survey era. Of course, Perot's historically strong showing absent congressional Reform Party candidates potentially explains the increase in ticket splitting, although this phenomenon is often considered a symptom of party decline (e.g., Beck 1997; Keefe 1998).

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL EVIDENCE OF PARTY RESURGENCE

Because the conventional wisdom has a strong hold, I must demonstrate that a resurgence of party at the mass level has occurred. I do so by relying on many of the measures developed in the 1980s to show party decline. Key to Wattenberg's (1984) argument is an increase in the percentage of people with neutral feelings toward both parties, as measured by the net number of likes and dislikes offered by NES respondents. If people give more reasons for liking a party than disliking it, they are considered positive toward that party. If they provide more dislikes than likes, they are considered negative. An equal number of likes and dislikes or no responses at all indicate neutrality.

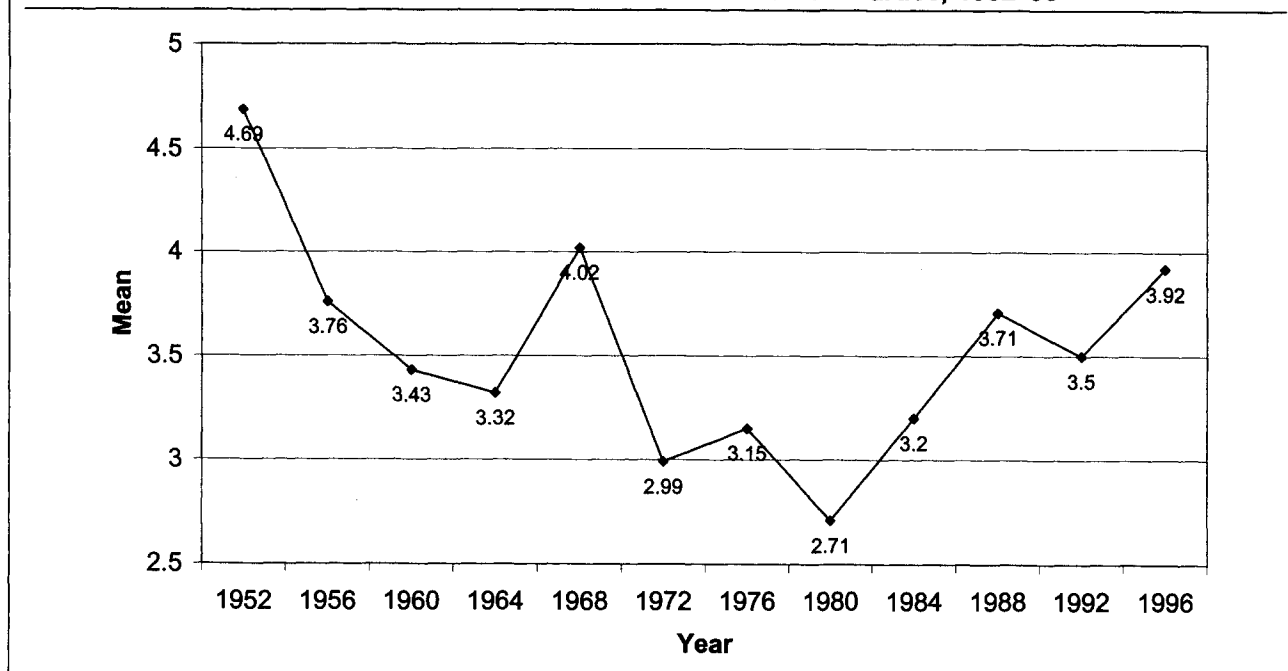
The solid lines in Figure 1 track changes in the most partisan and most neutral categories. The percentage of those neutral toward both parties declined by 6 points between 1980 and 1996, and the percentage of those positive toward one party and negative toward the other increased by the same amount. Positive-negative replaced neutral-neutral as the modal category in 1988 and continued as the mode through the rest of the time series. Although the proportion of positive-negatives in 1996 does not approach that of 1952, a movement toward greater partisanship is still evident.

This use of the likes-dislikes measure has several problems. In addition to obscuring differences between categories and overstating neutrality (see DeSart 1995; Konda and Sigelman 1987; Stanga and Sheffield 1987), the measure lacks a stated neutral point. People are classified as neutral if they unwittingly balance the number of likes and dislikes or, perhaps more problematically, provide no answers at all. Feeling thermometers are more attractive because they have an explicit neutral point, 50 degrees, and almost all respondents provide valid answers (Craig 1985).³

I can use the NES party thermometers to construct a measure of affect similar to Wattenberg's. I classify those who answer 50 degrees to both thermometers as neutral-neutral, those who answer above 50 degrees to one party and below 50 degrees to the other as positive-negative, and so forth. The results appear as the broken lines in Figure 1. The most noteworthy finding is the recent upsurge in positive-negatives. Only about 35% fell into this most partisan category in 1980, compared to nearly half in 1996, which represents an increase of 40%.

Konda and Sigelman (1987) measure party engagement as the total number of likes and dislikes that respondents provide about the parties. Figure 2 reveals that parties are far more salient in the 1990s than in the 1970s and 1980s; the mean number of responses in 1996 was higher than in any year except 1952 and 1968. By this measure, the salience of party has increased by 45% since 1980.

³ The NES changed the phrasing of the party thermometer questions in 1978. Previously, respondents were asked how they felt about "Republicans" and "Democrats." Subsequently, they have been asked about the "Republican Party" and the "Democratic Party." In 1980, the NES asked both versions, and the difference in means was quite large. Therefore, I cannot extend the analysis back any farther.

FIGURE 2. Mean Total Number of Likes and Dislikes about the Parties, 1952–96

Another indicator of party-centric attitudes is straight ticket voting. Wattenberg (1994) notes that voting for a presidential candidate and House member of different parties reached a high for the NES era in 1992, but Figure 3 demonstrates that 1992 was an anomaly. Even if third party voters are included, a higher percentage of Americans reported voting for a presidential and House candidate of the same party in 1996 than in any year since 1964. The tendency is much clearer among major party presidential voters. Straight ticket voting for president and House in this group has increased progressively since 1980. Even in 1992, when partisanship was supposedly at a low point, Bush and Clinton voters were more inclined to vote for the same party in their House election than were Bush and Dukakis or Reagan and Mondale voters.⁴

Although these data suggest a dramatic resurgence in party, Perot's historically large vote share in 1992 appears to suggest the opposite. Scholars have shown, however, that such factors as the third party candidate's personal characteristics (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996) and respondents' trust in government (Hetherington 1999) better explain third party voting than does strength of partisanship. Moreover, Perot's

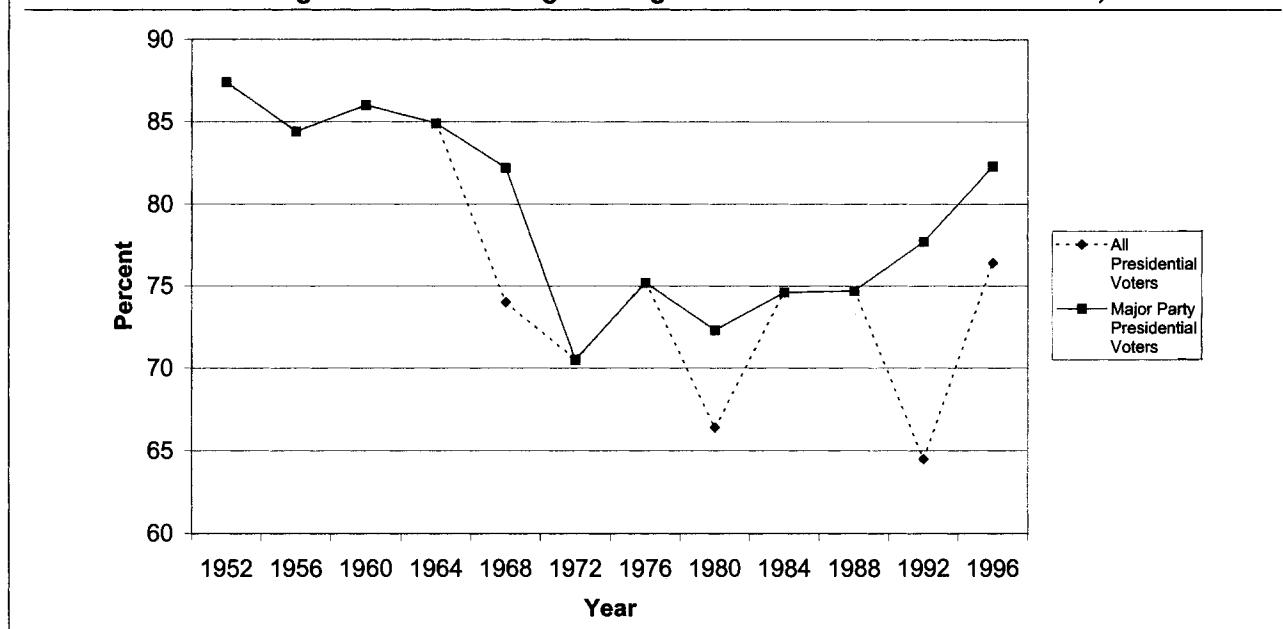
⁴ It can be argued that third party presidential voters are the least partisan and hence least likely to vote a straight ticket. Therefore, by focusing only on major party presidential voters, I may overstate the increase in party loyalty. If this were true, however, a higher level of straight ticket voting among major party presidential voters should have occurred in 1992, when Perot received 19% of the vote, than in 1996, when he received just 9%. Instead, of major party presidential voters in the two years, 78% voted for a House candidate of the same party in 1992, whereas 82% did so in 1996. If the focus on major party voters merely eliminated those who might have been least likely to vote a straight ticket had Perot not run, I would have found more straight ticket voters in 1992 than 1996 because twice as many of the supposedly least partisan third party voters were eliminated.

personal fortune allowed him to overcome many of the handicaps—such as ballot access laws, small advertising budgets, and dismissive news reporting—faced by most third party candidacies (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996). In short, Perot's showing resulted primarily from factors other than party decline.

WHAT CAUSES MASS OPINION TO CHANGE?

Mass opinion in the aggregate tends to move glacially if at all (Page and Shapiro 1992). When it does move, it usually responds to changes in the information environment provided by elites. Although the authors of *The American Voter* partially blame cognitive limitations for Americans' lack of ideological sophistication, they also recognized the importance of elite-level cues: "There are periods in which the heat of partisan debate slackens and becomes almost perfunctory, and the positions of the parties become relatively indistinct on basic issues. In times such as these, even the person sensitive to a range of political philosophies may not feel this knowledge to be helpful in an evaluation of current politics" (Campbell et al. 1960, 256). V.O. Key's (1966) echo chamber analogy further suggests that elite behavior will set the terms by which the masses think about politics (see also Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979; Page 1978). If politicians provide party-oriented or issue-oriented cues, then the public will respond in a party-centric or issue-centric manner. They are unlikely to do so without such cues.

Indeed, the most sophisticated recent theories of public opinion place elite behavior at the center of individual opinion change (Brody 1991; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Zaller 1992). For example, Carmines

FIGURE 3. Percentage of Voters Casting a Straight Ticket for President and House, 1952–96

and Stimson (1989) identify changes in the behavior of Republican and Democratic elites as the engine for an issue evolution on race in the 1960s. Similarly, Brody (1991) argues that we can best understand presidential approval by observing elite behavior. He maintains that elite consensus generally predicts higher approval ratings, and elite division usually means lower approval (see also Mermin 1999).

Zaller (1992, 311), who develops the connection between elite behavior and mass opinion most completely, concludes that even those most attentive to politics “respond to new issues mainly on the basis of the partisanship and ideology of the elite sources in the messages.” If people are exposed to a heavily partisan stream of information, which will be more likely if elites are behaving in a partisan manner, then it follows that respondents will express opinions that reflect the heavily partisan stream. Because greater ideological differences between the parties on the elite level should produce a more partisan information stream, elite polarization should produce a more partisan mass response.

PARTY RESURGENCE ON THE ELITE LEVEL

One measure that taps changing elite behavior is Poole and Rosenthal’s DW-NOMINATE scores for members of Congress.⁵ These scores allow for both between-member and between-year comparisons. An increasing ideological distance between Democratic and Republican elites should produce a more partisan

⁵ DW-NOMINATE scores are the most commonly used estimate of the ideological position of members of Congress. Members’ ideal points are derived using a dynamic, weighted, nominal three-step estimation procedure based on all nonunanimous roll call votes taken in each Congress (see Poole and Rosenthal 1997 for details).

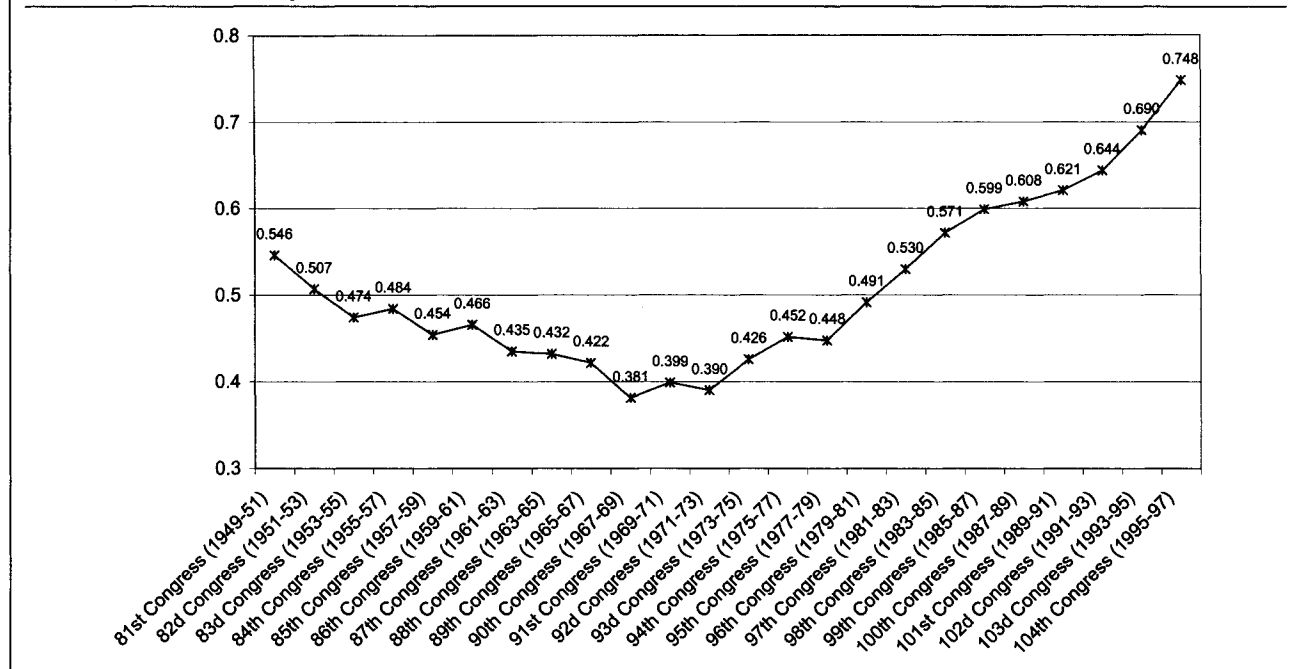
information environment for ordinary Americans, especially in view of the media’s well-known bias toward framing politics in terms of conflict (Graber 1997, chap 4).

To measure party polarization in the House, I divided members by party, calculated the mean DW-NOMINATE score on each dimension for each caucus, and calculated the weighted Euclidean distance between them.⁶ Figure 4 tracks the distance between the House Republican and Democratic caucuses from the 81st Congress, which began a few days into 1949, to the 104th Congress, which ended a few days into 1997. Polarization declined steadily from the late 1940s into the late 1960s and remained relatively constant until the late 1970s, a trough that coincides with the decline of party in the electorate. Congressional behavior then changed in the late 1970s. With the 95th Congress, ideological polarization between the parties began a steady rise.⁷

These changes in congressional behavior correspond closely with, but slightly precede, the increases in measures of mass partisanship described above. For example, half the growth in elite polarization occurred

⁶ Because Poole and Rosenthal compute the coordinates with a weighted utility model, any use of the DW-NOMINATE scores to calculate a distance requires that the second dimension be weighted by .3 (see Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Scores for the Senate, although less polarized, follow much the same pattern as those for the House (Poole 1998).

⁷ Scholars suggest several alternatives to the measure of polarization used here. For example, Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde (1999) employ a number of measures of both polarization and homogeneity, including the median distance between the parties, the intraparty homogeneity along the NOMINATE score’s first dimension, and the proportion of members of one party who ideologically overlap the other party on the first dimension. It is worth noting that the mean Euclidean distance measure that I employ here is correlated with these three measures at .99, .99, and .97, respectively, when I use data from the 85th to the 103d Congress.

FIGURE 4. Mean Euclidean Distance between Republican and Democratic Party DW-NOMINATE Scores, House of Representatives, 1949–97

between the last Congress in the Carter administration and the first Congress in the second Reagan administration. The start of the substantial increases in the total number of likes and dislikes and the trend toward straight ticket voting took hold in the election cycles that followed. On the heels of the second spike in elite polarization, which occurred during the second Congress of the Bush administration (the 102d), all measures of party strength responded in kind, with the rise in the percentage of positive-negatives the most dramatic. Elite polarization, therefore, appears to be a potential engine for change at the mass level.

INCREASED CLARITY OF PARTY IMAGES AS AN INTERMEDIATE STEP

I place elite polarization at the heart of the explanation for party resurgence and hypothesize a set of causal dynamics between elites and ordinary Americans similar to those posited and demonstrated by Carmines and Stimson (1989, 160) regarding racial issue positions. More partisan elite behavior caused by polarization should clarify party positions for the public, which in turn should influence the importance and salience of parties.⁸

One way to test whether clarity has increased is simply to ask people whether they see important differences between what the parties represent. The NES does so, and the solid line in Figure 5 tracks this trend. From 1960 to 1976, the percentage who per-

ceived important differences ranged from the high 40s to the middle 50s. A marked upturn began in 1980, and 58% or more have seen important differences every year since. The percentage reached 63% in 1996, the highest level in the series.⁹

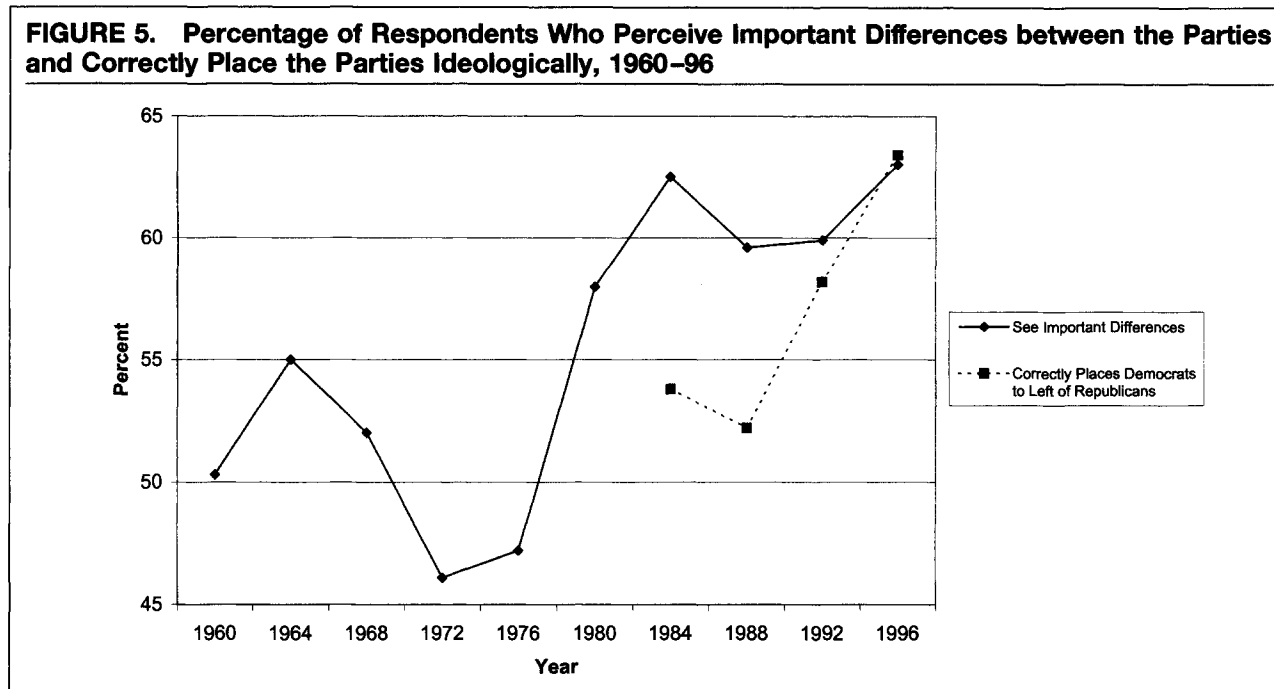
The “important differences” responses suggest greater clarity has occurred but not why. Since the polarization in Congress has been ideological, ideological differences are a likely reason. One measure of this is whether the public can array the parties correctly on a liberal-conservative scale. If ideological clarity has increased, then people should be both better able to place the Democrats to the left of the Republicans and more likely to perceive a larger distance between them.

The broken line in Figure 5 demonstrates that people in the 1990s are better able to array the parties ideologically. From 1984 until 1990, only about 50% of the public did so correctly, but this figure reached 63% in 1996.¹⁰ In addition to arraying the parties correctly, respondents perceive a widening ideological gulf between them. According to data from the NES Cumu-

⁹ Wattenberg (1990) identifies but dismisses this trend, noting that people are not also more inclined to think one of the parties is better able to solve their important problems. A potential explanation for this contradiction is that people perceive greater party polarization but are not necessarily enthusiastic about it (Dionne 1991; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). In that sense, people may think the parties will do a different job, not an ideal job.

¹⁰ I can make safe comparisons only starting in 1984. Before then, respondents who refused to place themselves on an ideological continuum or said they did not know were not asked to place the parties. Beginning in 1984, a follow-up question asked such respondents “if they had to choose,” what they would consider themselves to be. Only those who refused the follow up as well were not asked to place the parties, which reduced missing data by more than half between 1980 and 1984.

⁸ In exploring the influence of party activists on party ideologies, Aldrich (1995, chap. 6) employed variations on several of these measures of clarity and reached results consistent with mine. He does not suggest, however, that greater clarity reinvigorated partisanship at the mass level.



lative File (Sapiro et al. 1997), the mean signed ideological distance between the parties rose from 1.52 points in 1984 to 1.94 points in 1992 and 1996, an increase of 28%.¹¹ I use the signed rather than absolute ideological distance because elite polarization should also help people array the parties correctly. The use of absolute distance would make equivalent the placement of Democrats one unit to the left or to the right of Republicans, which would obscure the increasing proportion of correct placements.

Similar to the pattern revealed by the indicators of party resurgence, the increases in party clarity occurred soon after increases in elite polarization. Apparently, as party elites began to clarify ideological cues, citizens became less inclined to see the parties as Tweedledee and Tweedledum. When people perceive that who wins and loses will lead to distinct futures, they should develop more partisan feelings and become more inclined to organize politics in partisan terms.

WHY PARTY CLARITY HAS INCREASED

As parties in Congress have become more polarized along party lines, people have become more inclined to

¹¹ To compare data from 1996 with other years in the NES Cumulative File, the NES provides a weight to correct for a too highly educated 1996 sample. I do this for all other descriptive analyses, but I use the unweighted data for perceived ideological distance because the weighting overcorrects due to a rapid decline in missing data for this item over time. Specifically, only 9.5% of cases are missing in 1996, compared with 20% or more in preceding years. If I employ the weight, it reduces the mean for education (2.48) among those with valid responses in 1996 below the 1984 mean (2.52). Among all weighted respondents, however, the mean for education rose a statistically significant .09 points between 1984 and 1996. Even without weighting the data for perceived ideological distance, the mean for education in 1984 (2.52) is still too high relative to that of 1996 (2.54), which likely accounts for the leveling off of perceived ideological distance between 1992 and 1996.

see important differences between the parties, place them correctly in an ideological space, and perceive a wider ideological distance between them. I will test whether there is a causal connection between elite polarization and these mass responses.

I employ a pooled cross-sectional design, using data gathered by the NES in both presidential and off-year elections between 1960 and 1996. This design allows me to merge contextual information over time, namely, the aggregate measures of ideological polarization in the House, with the survey data. Due to data limitations, I am often confined to the seven surveys taken between 1984 and 1996. The results are consistent, and often stronger, when I include appropriate dummy variables to confront these data limitations and extend the analysis back farther.

The first dependent variable is whether a respondent *Sees Important Differences* between what the parties represent. It is coded 1 if the respondent claims to see important differences, 0 otherwise. The second dependent variable is *Correct Ideological View of the Parties*, which is coded 1 if the respondent places the Democratic Party to the left of the Republican Party, 0 otherwise.¹² The third dependent variable is *Perceived Ideological Distance between the Parties*. It is measured as the signed difference between where respondents place the Republican and Democratic parties on the NES's seven-point liberal-conservative scale.

These three measures should be a function of a number of different attitudinal and contextual variables. Most important for my purposes is *Elite Polarization*. I tap this as the mean Euclidean distance in the DW-NOMINATE scores between the Democratic and

¹² To conserve cases, I include in the analysis both those who placed themselves ideologically and those who did not. This means that all those who failed to place themselves and thus were not asked to place the parties are coded 0.

Republican House caucuses, which I lag by one Congress for two reasons. First, a Congress officially ends after most postelection surveys have been completed, so using a contemporaneous term would suggest that, for example, congressional behavior in 1993 affects 1992 attitudes, which makes no temporal sense. Second, time elapses before the public perceives changes in elite behavior. Public opinion on race, for instance, did not react immediately to the parties' change in position (Carmines and Stimson 1989). In merging the contextual with the individual-level data, I give each 1996 respondent the mean Euclidean distance from the 1993–95 session of Congress, each 1994 respondent the mean Euclidean distance from the 1991–93 session, and so forth.¹³

A number of attitudinal measures also may affect the dependent variables, so they are added as controls. *Strength of Ideology* and *Strength of Partisanship* should play important roles. Those who place themselves near the poles of the seven-point scales demonstrate an understanding of ideology and partisanship and hence should be more inclined to see differences than those who place themselves at mid-scale. In addition, several social characteristics are relevant. Those with more *Education* will be less inclined to provide mid-scale responses than those with less (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), which increases both the probability that they will see differences between the parties and the extent of distance they see. *Age* should have a similar effect; older respondents, who have more political experience than younger ones, should be more inclined to see important differences, array the parties correctly, and see a wider gulf between them. In contrast, *Women* and *African Americans* exhibit less political expertise than males and whites, respectively (see e.g., Mondak 1999), so they should be less likely to see party differences.¹⁴

I also must account for contextual factors. People pay less attention and vote less in *Off-Year Elections*, so they should tend to see the parties as less distinct in nonpresidential years. Years characterized by *Divided Government* may make a difference. On the one hand, both parties have a prominent voice in government, which may increase people's ability to identify the parties ideologically. On the other hand, people may have a harder time deciding whether a president of one party or a Congress of the other is driving the ideolog-

ical direction of the country. Indeed, in 1990, fewer than half of Americans could even identify which party controlled the House, despite the fact that the Democrats had done so for nearly 40 years, so two voices may only serve to confuse citizens.

In sum, I estimate the following models to analyze the influence of elite polarization on three measures of mass-level clarity about the parties.

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Pr}(\text{sees important differences}) \\ &= f(\text{elite polarization, strength of partisanship,} \\ &\quad \text{education, age, black, female, off-year} \\ &\quad \text{election, divided government}).^{15} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Pr}(\text{correctly places the parties ideologically}) \\ &= f(\text{elite polarization, strength of ideology,} \\ &\quad \text{strength of partisanship, education, age,} \\ &\quad \text{black, female, off-year election,} \\ &\quad \text{divided government}). \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Perceived Ideological Distance} \\ &= f(\text{elite polarization, strength of ideology,} \\ &\quad \text{strength of partisanship, education, age,} \\ &\quad \text{black, female, off-year election, divided} \\ &\quad \text{government}). \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

The first two dependent variables are binary, so ordinary least-squares (OLS) estimates will be biased. Hence, I use logistic regression to estimate these models and use OLS to estimate the third.

The results in the first column of Table 1 suggest that elite polarization has a significant effect on whether people see important differences between the parties.¹⁶ In fact, all variables perform as expected, except for age, which is insignificant, and race, which is positive. That the Democrats have been much friendlier to the interests of African Americans appears to matter to this group in identifying important differences.

Achieving statistical significance in a sample of 19,000 is no great feat. More important, the effect of elite polarization is substantively important as well. If I account for the 1960 context of divided government in a presidential year and set the other variables to their 1960 mean values, the predicted probability of seeing a difference between the parties is .512, which is almost identical to the 50.9% of respondents who reported seeing a difference in 1960. If I hold all variables constant at their 1960 means, again account for divided government and election context, but increase elite polarization to its 1996 level, the predicted probability of seeing important differences rises to .611, an in-

¹³ I specify a model in which causation runs from the elite to mass level, but Rohde (1991) suggests the reverse. Our goals differ. Rohde explores changes in the direction of white southerners' party identification, whereas my concern is the strength of partisan attitudes. It is more likely that mass-level strength intensified over time in response to a more partisan elite environment than that a sudden, unexplained influx of stronger partisans in the electorate paved the way for the likes of Newt Gingrich and Jim Wright. Moreover, even the directional changes in southern partisanship described by Rohde were rooted in elite behavior changes on civil rights issues (Carmines and Stimson 1989).

¹⁴ I would have liked to include an objective measure of political knowledge, but the NES did not provide a consistent battery of knowledge items until 1988. Scholars often use formal education, which I include in the model, as a proxy for political knowledge (e.g., Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).

¹⁵ Because the NES only started to ask people to place themselves ideologically in 1972, I drop strength of ideology from the important differences equation, so I can include data from 1960, 1964, and 1968. Dropping strength of ideology should not affect the results unduly, given that the partial correlation between elite polarization and the percentage who see important differences between the parties is an extremely robust .87, controlling for off-year election years.

¹⁶ Because my measure of elite polarization is not independent from year to year, there may be some concern about autocorrelation. Regression diagnostics revealed no such problems. For instance, the Durbin-Watson statistics for the OLS models presented below are 1.99 and 1.97, respectively, which indicates not even a hint of autocorrelation.

TABLE 1. Perceptions of Ideological Clarity and Measures of Party Strength as a Function of Elite Polarization, Political Attitudes, Social Characteristics, and Contextual Factors

| Variable | (I) Sees Important Differences 1960-96 Param. Est. (Std. Err.) | (II) Places Dems. to Left of Reps. 1984-96 Param. Est. (Std. Err.) | (III) Perceived Ideological Dist. 1984-96 Param. Est. (Std. Err.) | (IV) Respondent Is a Positive-Negative 1984-96 | | (V) Total Party Likes and Dislikes 1984-96 | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|---|--|---|--|
| | | | | Full Model Param. Est. (Std. Err.) | Reduced Form Param. Est. (Std. Err.) | Full Model Param. Est. (Std. Err.) | Reduced Form Param. Est. (Std. Err.) |
| Elite polarization | 1.707*** (0.189) | 2.065*** (0.444) | 2.017*** (0.491) | 3.103*** (0.468) | 3.087*** (0.434) | 2.144** (0.815) | 2.918*** (0.722) |
| Perceived ideological distance | — | — | — | 0.136*** (0.009) | — | 0.280*** (0.015) | — |
| Education | 0.383*** (0.016) | 0.803*** (0.022) | 0.626*** (0.023) | 0.206*** (0.023) | 0.266*** (0.021) | 0.928*** (0.037) | 1.101*** (0.031) |
| Strength of partisanship | 0.469*** (0.016) | 0.268*** (0.020) | 0.135*** (0.024) | 0.606*** (0.024) | 0.648*** (0.022) | 0.466*** (0.037) | 0.601*** (0.031) |
| Strength of ideology | — | 0.610*** (0.023) | 0.461*** (0.025) | 0.336*** (0.024) | 0.374*** (0.022) | 0.475*** (0.039) | 0.683*** (0.035) |
| Race (African American) | 0.186*** (0.049) | -0.458*** (0.058) | -0.569*** (0.069) | -0.125 (0.067) | -0.112* (0.059) | -0.225* (0.110) | -0.309*** (0.092) |
| Age | -0.006 (0.009) | 0.052*** (0.011) | 0.086*** (0.013) | -0.035** (0.013) | -0.016 (0.011) | 0.166*** (0.021) | 0.174*** (0.017) |
| Sex (female) | -0.305*** (0.031) | -0.310*** (0.039) | -0.074 (0.044) | -0.036 (0.042) | -0.067 (0.039) | -0.803*** (0.069) | -0.862*** (0.060) |
| Divided government | -0.138*** (0.035) | -0.069 (0.071) | -0.200* (0.078) | -0.194** (0.075) | -0.203** (0.069) | -0.334** (0.126) | -0.351** (0.111) |
| Off-year election | -0.551*** (0.040) | -0.176*** (0.045) | -0.290*** (0.051) | -0.232*** (0.049) | -0.272*** (0.045) | -0.224* (0.092) | -0.240** (0.079) |
| Intercept | -2.531*** (0.107) | -4.518*** (0.313) | -2.332*** (0.347) | -5.001*** (0.337) | -5.138*** (0.310) | -2.105*** (0.565) | -3.509*** (0.496) |
| χ^2 | 1956.75*** | 3555.78*** | — | 1863.49*** | 2012.54*** | — | — |
| Adjusted R^2 | — | — | .13 | — | — | .22 | .23 |
| SEE | — | — | 2.321 | — | — | 3.239 | 3.139 |
| Number of cases | 19,206 | 14,109 | 11,394 | 11,255 | 13,405 | 8,967 | 11,191 |

Source: American National Election Studies, Cumulative File, 1948-96.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; one-tailed tests.

crease of .099, and is not much different from the 63.0% who reported seeing a difference in 1996.

Among the other independent variables, between 1960 and 1996 only education changed such that it would increase the probability of seeing important differences between the parties. In a simulation similar to the one above, holding elite polarization and all other variables at their 1960 means, and accounting only for the increase in education, the predicted probability of seeing important differences rises by .058. Although both factors are important, increased elite polarization is better than 50% more important than increased education in explaining change over time.

The results in the second column of Table 1 suggest that elite polarization has clarified mass perceptions of the parties' ideological differences.¹⁷ Between the 97th

¹⁷ The same pattern of results were obtained when I reestimated the models by successively dropping each year from the analysis, which suggests that the results are not a function of a single observation. In

and 103d Congress, the mean Euclidean distance between party members' DW-NOMINATE scores in the House grew from .530 to .690. When I increased elite polarization by this amount, set divided government to one, set off-year election to zero, and held all other variables constant at their 1984 means, the predicted probability that a respondent would correctly place the Democratic Party to the left of the Republican Party rose from .540 to .620. The increase of 8 percentage points caused by elite polarization between 1984 and 1996 likely accounts for a large portion of the 9.6 percentage point change that actually occurred.

addition, the results are not time bound. When I estimated a model using data back to 1972, the first year the ideology questions were asked, and included a dummy variable for pre-1984 cases to account for the differing response rates to the ideology questions, the effect of elite polarization remained statistically significant ($\beta = 1.329$, $p < .001$) and was substantively even larger, taking into account elite polarization's greater range over the longer period.

Across their ranges, variables such as education, strength of ideology, and strength of partisanship all have larger effects than elite polarization, but none increased by as much as 5% between 1984 and 1996. Indeed, only the increases in education and strength of ideology were statistically significant. When I performed parallel simulations for these two variables, I found that the predicted probability of arraying the parties correctly rose by a paltry .018 and .011 points, respectively.

The same pattern of results emerges in explaining perceived ideological distance between the parties, and the effect of elite polarization is again substantively important.¹⁸ These results appear in the third column of Table 1. Multiplying the parameter estimate by the .16-point increase between 1984 and 1996 produces an increase of .323 in perceived ideological distance. The dependent variable increased by .4 between 1984 and 1996, and greater elite polarization accounts for about 80% of the change, other things being equal.

For the third equation, the attitudinal variables and social characteristics performed as expected. It is important to note, however, that only education and strength of ideology rose significantly between 1984 and 1996. Multiplying their respective parameter estimates by their differences in means provides their contribution to the increase of .4. These calculations yield increases of .094 and .059, respectively. Both effects pale in comparison to that of elite polarization.

EXPLAINING PARTY RESURGENCE

As Carmines and Stimson (1989) would predict, the results thus far suggest that elite polarization has clarified public perceptions of the parties' ideological positions. What difference does greater clarity make? Some suggest that perceptions of polarized parties may cause dissatisfaction (e.g., Dionne 1991; Fiorina 1996; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; King 1997), but I contend that greater ideological clarity should invigorate partisan attitudes. When people believe that parties provide choices not echoes (Key 1966; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979; Page 1978), they ought to be more concerned about who dictates public policy. As people come to realize that Democrats and Republicans will pursue substantially different courses, attachment to one side or the other becomes more consequential, and party image becomes more salient (see also Carmines and Stimson 1989).

To test the influence of elite polarization on party affect and salience, I estimated models for two measures of party resurgence: whether someone is a *Positive-Negative* using the party feeling thermometers and the *Total Number of Party Likes and Dislikes* provided by a respondent. I used the same right-hand side variables as above for the same reasons, but I added

the third measure of party clarity, *Perceived Ideological Distance*, to the right-hand side as well. If people see sharper distinctions between the parties, parties should be more important and salient to them. This specification allows elite polarization to have both a direct effect on party affect and an indirect effect through perceived ideological distance.

In functional form, the models are as follows.

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Pr}(\text{Respondent is a Positive-Negative}) \\ &= f(\text{elite polarization, strength of ideology,} \\ &\quad \text{strength of partisanship, education, age,} \\ &\quad \text{black, female, off-year election, divided} \\ &\quad \text{government, perceived ideological distance}). \quad (4) \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Total Number of Party Likes and Dislikes} \\ &= f(\text{elite polarization, strength of ideology,} \\ &\quad \text{strength of partisanship, education, age,} \\ &\quad \text{black, female, off-year election, divided} \\ &\quad \text{government, perceived ideological distance}). \quad (5) \end{aligned}$$

Again, the first dependent variable is binary, which prompts the use of logistic regression. The second dependent variable is an interval scale, which allows the use of OLS.

The results appear in the fourth and sixth columns of Table 1. Elite polarization is again positively signed and statistically significant for both dependent variables. Its effect, moreover, is substantial. When I increased elite polarization from its 1984 to its 1996 level, accounted for divided government and a presidential election year, and held all other variables constant at their 1984 mean values, the predicted probability that a respondent will be a positive-negative rose from .325 to .442. In addition, elite polarization has an indirect effect through perceived ideological distance. Recall that elite polarization expands the distance between the parties by .323. When I increased perceived ideological distance by this amount above its 1984 mean, the probability of giving responses categorized as positive-negative rose by another .010, bringing the total effect of elite polarization to .127, *ceteris paribus*. Again, the effect of more education and stronger ideology did not approach that of growing elite polarization.

The same pattern of results emerges for the total number of likes and dislikes mentioned about the parties, as shown in the sixth column of Table 1. The parameter estimate of 2.144 for elite polarization suggests that its increase of .16 between 1984 and 1996 caused an estimated increase of .343 points in the number of likes and dislikes mentioned. Accounting for the rise of the .323 points in perceived ideological distance caused by elite polarization adds another .090 points to the dependent variable. Thus, the total effect of elite polarization is .433, or more than 60% of the increase of .72 in the dependent variable. In comparison, the total effects caused by a rise in education and strength of ideology between 1984 and 1996 are each less than one-quarter of that of elite polarization.

A large percentage of respondents do not answer the ideological self-placement question and, as a result, are not asked to place the parties, so including perceived

¹⁸ When I estimated a model using data back to 1972 and included a dummy variable for pre-1984 cases, the effect of elite polarization remained statistically significant ($\beta = 2.035$, $p < .001$) and was substantively much larger than that estimated from the 1984 and later cases.

ideological distance on the right-hand side creates a good deal of missing data. This may undermine confidence in the results, especially since those missing tend to be less sophisticated than those who provide responses. I therefore estimated reduced forms for equations 4 and 5, dropping perceived ideological distance from the models. Its effect should be captured by elite polarization, which allows the recapture of several thousand lost cases (Markus 1988). The results in the fifth and seventh columns of Table 1 demonstrate that elite polarization remains significant with or without the missing data.¹⁹ Taken together, these results suggest that increasingly strong partisan orientations on the mass level are a function of growing ideological polarization on the elite level.

RECEPTION OF ELITE POLARIZATION

Although the results thus far provide strong evidence that elite ideological polarization has produced a more partisan electorate, an even more rigorous test is to account for people's differing ability to absorb this information. A more ideologically polarized House should produce a more ideologically polarized issue environment, but those with more political expertise should reflect it better than those with less.

Many suggest that a measure of objective political knowledge is the best indicator of political expertise (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Price and Zaller 1993; Zaller 1992). Unfortunately, the NES only began asking a detailed battery of factual questions in 1988. The use of education as a proxy for knowledge is not ideal (see Luskin 1987), but many have done so (see e.g., Popkin 1994; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Indeed, people with more education should, on average, have better developed cognitive tools, which should allow them to absorb more political information. If a knowledge battery were available over a sufficiently long period, I would expect the results to be even stronger than those presented below.²⁰

I replicated each of the full models from Table 1 and introduced an interaction between elite polarization and education. Education is coded 1 for those who completed grade school, 2 for those who attended or graduated from high school, 3 for those who attended college, and 4 for college graduates and those with graduate degrees. The interaction should carry a positive sign, which indicates that those who can best use the information generated by a more polarized envi-

ronment are the most inclined to see differences between the parties and provide more partisan opinions.

Since the effects of each variable not included in the interactions are almost identical to those presented in Table 1, I include only the estimates for the interaction and its component parts in Table 2. In all five cases, the interaction is properly signed and statistically significant. To interpret the interaction, I calculated the total effect of elite polarization for the perceived ideological distance and the total number of likes and dislikes. Although the pattern is the same for the three logit models, the interpretation of the nonadditive OLS models is more straightforward. The total effect of elite polarization is derived as follows:

$$E_{\text{Elite Polarization}} = \beta_1 + \beta_3(\text{Education}_i), \quad (6)$$

where $E_{\text{Elite Polarization}}$ is the total effect of elite polarization, and Education_i is the i th respondent's level of education. In the perceived ideological distance equation, the estimate for β_1 is -1.209 and for β_3 is 1.271 , and in the likes/dislikes equation, β_1 is -4.209 and β_3 is 2.504 .

Given these estimated effects for perceived ideological distance, elite polarization has no effect ($E = .062$) on those who completed grade school (education = 1), and its effect for those with a high school education (education = 2) is a relatively small 1.333 . For those with at least some college (education = 3) and college graduates (education = 4), however, the effect is substantial: 2.604 and 3.875 , respectively. The results for the total number of likes and dislikes are similar. That is, elite polarization has no effect on people with less cognitive training, but among college attendees and graduates, the effect is a hefty 3.303 and 5.807 , respectively.

In sum, these results should increase confidence that elite polarization is driving the impressive increase in party-centric thinking on the mass level. People with the greatest ability to assimilate new information, those with more formal education, are most affected by elite polarization. These findings are all the more impressive in view of the fact that education is not an optimal proxy for political knowledge.²¹

CONCLUSION

The results presented here suggest that parties in the electorate have rebounded significantly since 1980 and that the party decline thesis is in need of revision (see also Bartels 2000). Although the environment does not mirror that of the 1950s, Americans in the 1990s are more likely to think about one party positively and one negatively, less likely to feel neutral toward either party, and better able to list why they like and dislike the parties than they were ten to thirty years ago.²²

¹⁹ There are roughly 2,200 more cases for the positive-negative equation than for the likes/dislikes equation. This is largely because only half samples were asked the likes/dislikes questions in 1986, 1990, and 1996. In addition, I estimated an equation using data back to 1952, dropping both ideological polarization and strength of ideology. Elite polarization remained significant ($\beta = 2.180$, $p < .001$), which suggests that the results are not time bound.

²⁰ The NES has asked one factual item in almost every survey since 1960: which party controlled the House of Representatives prior to the election. When I specified an interaction between whether the respondent answered this question correctly and elite polarization, the same basic pattern of results emerged. Because this is a single item and one that many are likely to get right by guessing (Luskin n.d.), I opted to use education instead.

²¹ The results for the interactive terms were replicated when I included a dummy variable for pre-1984 cases and extended the analyses for party placement and perceived ideological distance back to 1972. The results for the total number of likes and dislikes also were replicated when I included data back to either 1972 or 1952.

²² Although the results are not presented here due to space considerations, I found that elite polarization also has increased the

TABLE 2. Replication of Models in Table 1, Adding an Interaction between Elite Polarization and Education

| Variable | Sees Important Differences, Parameter Estimate (Standard Error) | Places Democrats to Left of Republicans, Parameter Estimate (Standard Error) | Perceived Ideological Distance, Parameter Estimate (Standard Error) | Respondent Is a Positive-Negative, Parameter Estimate (Standard Error) | Total Party Likes and Dislikes, Parameter Estimate (Standard Error) |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|---|--|---|
| Elite polarization | 0.068 (0.408) | -0.261 (1.304) | -1.209 (1.485) | -0.094 (1.448) | -4.209* (2.280) |
| Education | 0.061 (0.086) | 0.273 (0.311) | 0.135 (0.331) | -0.537* (0.320) | -0.570 (0.504) |
| Elite polarization × Education | 0.620*** (0.164) | 0.886* (0.520) | 1.271* (0.552) | 1.239** (0.532) | 2.504*** (0.839) |

Source: American National Election Studies, Cumulative File, 1948-96.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; one-tailed tests.

Consistent with most theories of public opinion, these mass-level changes have resulted from changes in elite behavior. Greater ideological polarization in Congress has clarified public perceptions of party ideology, which has produced a more partisan electorate.

Although I have focused on the strength as opposed to direction of partisanship, the results of this study may have implications for the latter as well. In discussing macropartisanship, some suggest that such short-term influences as changes in economic conditions and presidential approval ratings have profound effects on the distribution of Republicans and Democrats (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 1998; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989), whereas others argue that their effects are minimal (e.g., Green, Palmquist, and Shickler 1998). Because strength of partisanship in the aggregate has fluctuated markedly over the last 50 years, heterogeneity in the time series is likely. When people hold their partisan ties more intensely, the probability of party identification change is reduced. Hence, the effect of short-term forces on macropartisanship should be smaller when strength of partisanship is relatively high and larger when it is relatively low.²³

The resurgence of party is, of course, good news for those who trumpet the unique role that parties traditionally have played in organizing political conflict (e.g., Shattschneider 1975). Voting theories work best

tendency of respondents to vote for presidential and House candidates of the same party, controlling for strength of partisanship, strength of ideology, race, age, sex, whether a House seat is open, whether a House seat is contested, whether a third party presidential candidate is running, and whether the House incumbent is of the party opposite the respondent's party identification.

²³ Green, Palmquist, and Shickler (2000) note that the proportion of Democratic identifiers did not rise substantially in the 1990s, despite extraordinary increases in consumer confidence and consistently high presidential approval ratings, which casts further doubt on the import of short-term forces. They argue that this may be the result of questionable estimation decisions made by MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989), but it also may have become harder to move macropartisanship in the 1990s because strength of partisanship has grown.

when people perceive that the parties represent distinct ideologies, which allows voters to make rational calculations about alternative futures (e.g., Downs 1957; Hinich and Munger 1994). My study suggests that voters are much better able to make such ideological distinctions than in the past. On average, partisanship allows less sophisticated Americans to connect their values and interests with vote choice (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), so voters should be able to participate more effectively as a result.

The election of 2000 provides further empirical evidence of mass party resurgence. The proportion of Republican and Democratic voters is nearly equal today (Miller 1998), so a national election strongly influenced by party should be very close, and American elections do not get much closer than the 2000 contest. Preliminary data from the 2000 NES suggest that more than 90% of both Democratic and Republican identifiers voted for their party's presidential candidate (Burns et al. 2001), and partisans of every stripe were significantly more loyal to their party's standard-bearer in 2000 than in either 1992 or 1996 (Pomper 2001, 138), which also were two highly partisan elections (Bartels 2000). In addition, straight ticket voting for president and House remained above 80% among major party presidential voters (Burns et al. 2001), which produced a razor-thin Republican majority in the House that reflects the closeness of the presidential race. Public reaction to the election was also strongly partisan. In early December, more than 90% of Republicans criticized Al Gore's legal efforts in Florida (Saad 2000), despite clear indications that a plurality of Floridians intended to vote for him (Brady et al. 2001), and more than 80% of Democrats approved of Gore's legal challenge (Saad 2000).

It is easy to overlook a party resurgence when symptoms often associated with weak parties, such as third party candidacies and divided government, are regular features of the political environment. Such phenomena, however, result from other factors in addition to weak partisanship. Ross Perot certainly

benefited from party independence, but his success was mostly a function of his personal style and fortune (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996). To the extent that weak parties do advantage third party efforts, moreover, it is noteworthy that third parties have drawn progressively fewer votes over the last three presidential elections, a period when my results suggest that partisanship in the electorate has strengthened.

In addition, strong parties do not automatically produce unified government (Fiorina 1992). Although the late nineteenth century was America's most partisan era, divided governments were the norm. Today, candidate quality and fundraising play a dominant role in understanding which voters split their tickets (Burden and Kimball 1999). If either party gains a significant identification advantage among regular voters, unified government will almost certainly result. Until then, we are likely to see close presidential elections and small majorities for one or the other party in both houses of Congress.

APPENDIX A. QUESTION WORDING

Partisanship

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what? (If Republican or Democrat.) Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican/Democrat)? (If independent, other, or no preference:) Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?

Ideology Questions

We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you (1996: Here is) a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

Where would you place the Democratic Party?

Where would you place the Republican Party?

Sees Important Differences

Do you think there are any important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for?

Party Feeling Thermometers

I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days (1990: who have been in the news). I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorably and warm toward the person; ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorably toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one.

The Democratic Party.

The Republican Party.

Likes/Dislikes

Is there anything in particular that you like about the Democratic Party? What is that?

Anything else [you like about the Democratic Party]? Up to five mentions.

Is there anything in particular that you dislike about the Democratic Party? What is that?

Anything else [you dislike about the Democratic Party]? Up to five mentions.

Is there anything in particular that you like about the Republican Party? What is that?

Anything else [you like about the Republican Party]? Up to five mentions.

Is there anything in particular that you dislike about the Republican Party? What is that?

Anything else [you dislike about the Republican Party]? Up to five mentions.

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