Current concern about heightened polarization stems from its hypothesized negative consequences – including poor public policies, incapacity to govern and solve pressing national problems, a decline of civility in U.S. politics, widespread public frustration and declines in public trust and in the legitimacy of government and its leaders.2

**QUESTIONS**  But has political polarization actually increased in recent U.S. history? How is elite party polarization related to polarization among citizens? What are the actual consequences of political polarization? Is incivility in political discourse one of them?

**SEEKING ANSWERS**

- There is general agreement that current U.S. party politics are polarized.3 Polarization among elite political party members is much higher than it was forty years ago, but it is important to note that the early 1970s stands out as one of the most bipartisan eras in American history. Historically, elite party polarization is the usual state of affairs.

- There is substantially more debate about mass polarization, the evidence for which includes a wide variety of factors (see box at right). For example:
  - One study saw “little indication of ... the middle losing people to both extremes.” Rather, we see a largely centrist public drifting slightly rightward on some issues, slightly leftward on others, but with only very small declines ... in the number of moderates.”4
  - In contrast, another emphasized “marked (and statistically significant) increases in mass party polarization.”5

Overall, catch phrases such as “the two Americas,” “red state/blue state” and America’s “culture wars” employed by politicians, media commentators and academics have fostered an exaggerated sense of the scope of mass polarization.6 But researchers agree that ideology and opinions on policy issues have become more polarized with respect to party identification.7

- Research clearly shows that the relationship between elite polarization and mass polarization is reciprocal; voters respond to issues articulated by party elites and those elites make assumptions – or investigate via polls – and then respond.8

Scholarship points to partisan activists in particular as the original instigators of the reciprocal polarization dynamic.9 Among other things, they have pushed for more openness in processes such as presidential nominations, ultimately affording these activists more power. Such institutional change in the American political system has incentivized party candidates, leaders and office holders to stake out more, rather than less, extreme positions.

- Some researchers argue that, as political polarization has grown, civility in American politics has diminished, with one example being documented instances of uncivil discourse on the floor.
of the House. Lacking definitive answers, the most plausible dynamic is a reciprocal relationship between political polarization and incivility.

- Evidence about the implications of polarization for citizen attitudes is notably mixed:
  - While confidence in Congress has gone down in times of polarization, “confidence in the Supreme Court fares better during a highly partisan period.”
  - Contrary to fears, “as the leaders and the Democratic and Republican parties have become increasingly polarized along ideological lines, interest in politics and participation in political activities have been increasing among the public.”
  - Voter turnout has been increasing since 1996, especially among self-declared liberals and conservatives, but even among self-described moderates.
  - Perceptions of efficacy have generally declined, although they have “risen among self-identified conservatives.”
  - Meanwhile, “perceptions of government responsiveness generally have risen as national polarization has increased.”

**IMPLICATIONS** Even if polarization is not associated with many of its “hypothesized dire consequences,” there still may be cause for concern to the extent that polarization is accompanied by greater incivility in political discourse. This is because findings in recent studies “suggest that exposure to uncivil discourse in the media erodes political trust, engenders more negative assessments of political institutions and triggers increased emotional response.” Further, if elite party polarization and mass polarization are of concern, institutional remedies that lessen the influence of party activists or re-incentivize pragmatism over ideological purity among party activists may be required.

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1 This synopsis is based on the National Institute for Civil Discourse Issue Brief No. 6: Political Polarization by Robin Stryker, Department of Sociology, The University of Arizona, dated September 1, 2011.
7 Layman et al 2006, supra n. 6.
8 See Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization & American Democracy,* Yale University Press, 2010; Layman et al 2006, supra n. 2; Fiorina and Adams 2008, supra n. 2; Hetherington 2009, supra n. 3.


Abramowitz 2010, supra n. 7, p. 33 and data displayed in Table 2.1.

Hetherington 2008, supra n. 2, pp. 5-6.


Ibid. p. 583.

Ibid. p. 583.


Fiorina and Adams 2008, supra n. 2.