Research Synopsis
Political Polarization[1]

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA.
National
Institute for
Civil Discourse

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:

  o 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]

  o In contrast, another emphasized "marked (and statistically significant) increases in mass party polarization."[5]

  > **Common measures of mass polarization** assess the amount of divergence in attitudes:
  > - between the median Republican and median Democratic voter,
  > - in socio-cultural preferences,
  > - in positions on ideology and issues,
  > - in the degree to which people cluster geographically with like minded others, and
  > - in preference between contending Democratic and Republican party candidates.[18]

  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 <u>partisan activists</u> 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.[10] 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:

  o While confidence in Congress has gone down in times of polarization, "<u>confidence in the Supreme Court fares better</u> during a highly partisan period."[11]

  o Contrary to fears, "as the leaders and the Democratic and Republican parties have become increasingly polarized along ideological lines, <u>interest in politics and participation in political activities have been increasing</u> among the public."[12]

  o <u>Voter turnout has been increasing</u> since 1996, especially among self-declared liberals and conservatives, but even among self-described moderates.[13]

  o <u>Perceptions of efficacy have generally declined</u>, although they have "risen among self-identified conservatives."[14]

  o Meanwhile, "<u>perceptions of government responsiveness</u> generally have risen as national polarization has increased."[15]

IMPLICATIONS   Even if polarization is not associated with many of its "hypothesized dire consequences,"[16] **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."[17]

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**.

---

[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.

[2] Geoffrey C. Layman, Thomas M. Carsey and Juliana M. Horowitz, "Party Polarization in American Politics: Characteristics, Causes, and Consequences," *Annual Review of Political Science* 9, 2006, pp. 83-110; Marc J. Hetherington, "Turned Off or Turned On? How Polarization Affects Political Engagement," in *Red and Blue Nation? Vol. 2: Consequences and Correction of America's Polarized Politics*, ed. P.S. Nivola and D. W. Brady, Hoover Institution and Brookings Institution, 2008, pp. 1-33; David W. Brady, John Ferejohn and Laurel Harbridge, "Polarization and Public Policy: A General Assessment," in *Red and Blue Nation? Vol. 2: Consequences and Correction of America's Polarized Politics*, ed. P. S. Nivola and D. W. Brady, Hoover Institution and Brookings Institution, 2008, pp. 185-217; Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, 2008, pp. 563-588; Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism & Polarization in American Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2009; Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, MIT Press, 2006.

[3] Layman et al, 2006, *supra* n. 2; David W. Brady and Hahrie C. Han, "Polarization Then and Now: A Historical Perspective," in *Red and Blue Nation? Vol. 1: Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics*, ed. P.S. Nivola and D. W. Brady, Hoover Institution and Brookings Institution, 2006, pp. 119-151; Marc J. Hetherington, "Review Article: Putting Polarization into Perspective," *British Journal of Political Science* 39, 2009, pp. 413-448; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006, *supra* n. 2, p. 1; Fiorina and Abrams 2008, *supra* n. 2.

[4] Fiorina and Abrams 2008, *supra* n. 2, p. 574.

[5] Layman et al, *supra* n. 2, p. 90, citing George C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey, "Party Polarization and 'Conflict Extension' in the American Electorate," *American Journal of Political Scienc*e 46, 2002, pp. 723-250.

[6] Morris Fiorina with Samual Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Third Edition, Longman, 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.

[9] See Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1989; Layman et al 2006, *supra* n. 2; Abramowitz 2010, *supra* n. 7.

[10] Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Erika Falk, "Continuity and Change in Civility in the House," in *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era*, ed. J. R. Bond and R. Fleisher, Congressional Quarterly Press, 2000, pp. 96-108.

[11] Fiorina and Abrams 2008, *supra* n. 2, p. 583.

[12] Abramowitz 2010, *supra* n. 7, p. 33 and data displayed in Table 2.1.

[13] Hetherington 2008, *supra* n. 2, pp. 5-6.

[14] Fiorina and Abrams 2008, *supra* n. 2, p. 583.

[15] *Ibid*, p. 583.

[16] *Ibid*, p. 583.

[17] Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey M. Barry, "From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News," *Political Communication* 28, 2011, pp. 19-41; p. 21; Kim L. Fridkin and Patrick J. Kenny, "The Dimensions of Negative Messages," *American Politics Research* 36, 2008, pp. 694-723; Diana C. Mutz, "Effects of In-Your-Face Television Discourse on perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition," *American Political Science Review* 101, 2007, pp. 621-635; Diana C Mutz and Bryon Reeves, "The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust," *American Political Science Review* 99, 2005, pp. 1-15.

[18] Fiorina and Adams 2008, *supra* n. 2.