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American Political Polarization

In 2008, when fresh-faced presidential candidate Barack Obama coasted to electoral victory, it was clear that the world had ended. Flabbergastingly, in an insane display of misjudgment, the American people had elected to office a president who, according to one prominent GOP member, would ‘pal around with terrorists,’ a president whose socialistic temperaments signaled the dawn of a new and darker era of American politics. Obama’s presidency would be a disaster of biblical proportions—a reign of fire. Beside Obama’s America, even the Canadian hinterlands looked welcoming. The rapture, it seemed, had come.

On the other hand, Barack Obama’s victory was the greatest thing to happen to the nation since the abolishment of slavery. Obama would, as a matter of fact, snatch America and indeed the world out from between the jaws of devastation. Here finally was the knight in shining armor the nation so desperately needed. Obama’s administration would be one of Hope: progressive, innovative and a total reinvention of the political status quo.

If you were at all cognizant in 2008, you will recognize these narratives. As patently ridiculous as they may seem, they represent with a fair bit of accuracy the two rhetorical extremes of America’s split political consciousness. The 2008 presidential election was a polarizing one, in which scores of political sideliners were evangelized, sorted into one or another ideological camp, and made to believe in a politics of destiny. The polarization visible throughout the 2008 election was not, however, a new phenomenon. For years, Congressional representatives had been growing steadily more segregated along party lines. And for years,

prominent political scientists had been identifying an ever-widening ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans. Recently, a study issued by the independent Pew Research Center exposed in clear terms the extent of political polarization in America, illustrating in hard data the schism that's opened up between the Democratic and Republican over the last thirty years.

Unquestionably, American politics have polarized over the last several decades. The question of *from where* American political polarization flows, however, remains unanswered. In particular, political scientists have occupied themselves with the question of *who*, exactly, provides the impetus for political polarization. Has the balance of American voters become polarized, and are they simply electing representatives to office who vote according to their ideological tastes? Or, perhaps, are voters no more ideologically polarized than they were twenty years ago, but simply forced to choose from a pool of increasingly polarized candidates? While each theory contains elements of truth, a synthesis of both is most defensible: Political polarization in America takes place among both elites and voters. In fact, a relationship between these two types of polarization is necessary to explain the creation of political atmospheres in which polarization is able to accelerate. The conclusions political scholars have arrived at about the nature of political polarization, however, should be taken with a grain of salt. The data used by the two theories of political polarization explored in this paper—one which preferences elites as polarizing vectors and one which preferences voters as the same—do not, I'll argue, adequately account for the influence of forces like the media, or of the limitations of conclusions drawn from data which requires survey participants to self-identify ideology. But to understand the possibility of error within prevailing theories of political polarization, we first must understand the theories.

In Morris Fiorina's essay, "America's Missing Moderates: Hiding in Plain Sight," Fiorina argues that political polarization in America, rather than being the product of ideological polarization among individual voters, is best explained by the disappearance from the political sphere of centrist candidates. Fiorina explicates the concept of "party sorting," the process by which political parties come under the leadership of minority ideologues:

"Since the mid 20th century, demographic changes, such as the migration of African-Americans to the north, the rise of the Sunbelt and immigration...have produced political parties that are more homogenous than they were a generation ago. And the most active and involved members comes from the most extreme reaches of each party" (Fiorina, 62).

The political preferences of most voters, Fiorina argues, fall much closer to the ideological center than they do to the preferences expressed by extreme party leaders. Unfortunately for moderate voters, however, the ability to choose a candidate who can represent their positions is highly limited. Thus, according to Fiorina, the rigid polarization on display in Congress is not a reflection on the political preferences of average voters (who would, if given the option, vote for a more moderate candidate). Rather it reflects the more extreme flavors of the party—the ideologies of the candidates who, due to the phenomenon of party sorting, are the only ones who make it to the ballot in the first place. Fiorina's argument intuitive rational sense. It does not require a great suspension of disbelief to imagine that the most politically active members of a party are also those most ideologically fervent. And if we accept that extreme, involved actors constitute the core of a party's leadership structure, it follows that the ideological "face" of the party will bear a strong resemblance to those dedicated and polarized actors. This

idea is sustained by the Pew Report on Political Polarization, which reports a sharp increase of party polarization among the most engaged and active members of both the Democratic and Republican parties. According to Pew, “almost four-in-ten (38%) politically engaged Democrats are consistent liberals, up from only 8% in 1994 and 20% in 2004” (Pew, Polarization, Section 1). Clearly, involved members of parties contribute to the polarization of the parties to which they belong.

In their essay “Is Polarization a Myth?”, political scientists Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders rebut Fiorina’s conception of polarization-as-elite-driven, replacing Fiorina’s model with the theory that individual American voters are the vectors of political polarization. In “Is Polarization a Myth?”, Abramowitz and Saunders challenge five of Fiorina’s critical assumptions: that the American public consists largely of moderates; that, while differences between parties have increased, the increases have only been slight; that cultural and political differences between traditionally “red” and “blue” states are only marginal; that “social cleavages,” such as differences in age, race, or religious identification have decreased; and that the polarization of party elites contributes to a depression in voter turnout (Abramowitz, 543). Employing a survey consisting of seven “issue questions,” designed to identify changes in affiliation with liberal-conservative ideology, Abramowitz and Saunders attempted to measure ideological change across a broad spectrum of survey participants. Grouping participants into categories, Abramowitz and Saunders identified ideological change among groups consisting of nonvoters, voters, low- and high-interest voters, college educated voters, and voters with some college education. The results of their study identify significant ideological shifts over ten- and twenty-year spans among educated voters, and less pronounced yet still significant ideological

shifts over similar periods among the other listed groups. Ideological shifts of up to 11%, measured from a period of years between 1980 and 2004, was identified as average among all respondents (546). This trend, too, is affirmed by the Pew Research Political Polarization study, which states that “the overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions [has] doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%” (Pew, Political Polarization, Section 1). Such rates suggests that, contrary to Fiorina’s theory of elite-driven political polarization, individual political polarization—that is, change in political ideology—does indeed occur over time. It is important to note that in Abramowitz and Saunders’s analysis, greater ideological change occurs in populations with higher levels of education and affluence. These populations—described by Abramowitz and Saunders as “the most interested, informed, and active members of the public” (Abramowitz, 545)—bear a striking resemblance to Fiorina’s polarizing party elite. And, indeed, this isn’t the only similarity between the two works.

Although Fiorina and Abramowitz and Saunders attribute political polarization to two distinct forces—to polarized party elites on one hand, and polarized voters on the other—there is a reciprocity—a self-reinforcing relationship—between these two forces which accelerates the process of polarization. There is strong evidence to support the argument that elites have a polarizing effect on the electorate; there is equally strong evidence to support the claim that the electorate itself has gone, in the last several decades, through periods of increased polarization. According to the Pew study of Political Polarization, “partisan animosity has increased substantially...in each party, the share with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994” (Pew, Political Polarization, Section 2). The increasingly hostile

political environment is, surely, a symptom of increasing rates of both electoral and elite polarization. As polarization increases, and as inter-party animosity builds, a climate of polarization develops, and the barriers to the acceleration of polarization decrease. According to Pew, between the years of 1994 and 2004, the percentage of Republican voters to the right of the median Democratic voters increased by 6%. Between 2004 and 2014, however, the percentage of R- voters to the right of the median D- voter increased by 22% (Pew, Political Polarization, Section 1). The same trends can be identified in the Democratic party, where between 1994 and 2014, 24% of Democrats shifted to the right of the median Republican voter. This demonstrates that, as polarization in America increases, so too does the *rate* of polarization. Even if, as Fiorina would argue, polarized elites misrepresent the average ideological position of party affiliates, Abramowitz and Saunders's clear demonstration of increased individual polarization indicates that there is a mutual—almost concerted—polarization that takes place at every level of a political party. A gentle push and pull is at work in the American system: The more polarized voters become, the more latitude the elites have to polarize without risk of electoral ejection; similarly, the more polarized elites become, the more latitude voters have to polarize while still remaining squarely within the ideological orthodoxy of their party.

Despite the comprehensive analysis of political polarization done by political scientists like Fiorina, Abramowitz and Saunders, there remain flaws in the way that debates about the issue are framed—gaping holes that need to be filled in before a truly systematic appraisal of political polarization in the American system could be conducted. The importance of media as a polarizing force, it seems, is largely ignored by the analyses of both Fiorina and Abramowitz and Saunders. In a paper entitled “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and

Nominations in American Politics” the authors highlight the importance of political journalism in influencing the voting patterns of partisans in elections:

“...when political excitement runs low, members of Congress can take extreme positions with little risk of defeat. But when excitement is high, and when congruence between [media] markets and [congressional] districts helps voters to learn about their congressional candidates, voters show a preference for centrists” (Bawn, Cohen, Karol, p. 583).

“A Theory of Political Parties” illustrates the potential shortcomings of both Fiorina’s and Abramowitz and Saunders’s arguments: In short, there is a multiplicity of factors whose exclusion could wreak havoc on the carefully cultivated and tabulated data of *any* study which deigns to limit itself to considering only a few of them.

Cognitive biases, too, pose a potential threat to the credibility of especially Fiorina’s argument. Throughout “America’s Missing Moderates: Hiding in Plain Sight,” Fiorina builds his arguments from the presumption that the ideological self-identification of his survey participants are accurate. This approach, however, does not account for circumstances that will influence or modify *actual* voting habits. Too, this approach is not well-suited to identifying the difference (if indeed one exists) between a professed ideology and an actual one.

At the very end of Abramowitz and Saunders’s “Is Polarization a Myth” comes a quote: “*When it comes to polarization, in the immortal words of pogo, ‘we have met the enemy and he is us’*” (554). Throughout the course of this paper, perhaps our one take-away has been that polarization in the American system exists in every level of society. It takes root in both the preferences of individual voters and in the ideologies of our elected leaders. In 2008, at least

rhetorically, political polarization seemed to have reached a fever pitch. In the wake of the election, however, political polarization has only increased, both among voters and representatives. One wonders if there is a maximum distance, a final tension, at which the American electorate, so thinly stretched along an ever-widening continuum of American political ideology, will be forced either to return to common ground or snap in two.

Bibliography (Sources in Addition to Fiorina, Abramowitz):

1. Bawn, Cohen, Karol; "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics"

http://masket.net/Theory_of_Parties.pdf