



Once More Unto the Breach

Is America Polarized?

Morris P. Fiorina

In the wee small hours of November 3, 2004, a new country appeared on the map of the modern world: The DSA, the Divided States of America. . . . Not since the Civil War has the fault lines between its two halves been so glaringly clear.

—Simon Schama¹

It is time for our society to acknowledge a sad truth: America is currently fighting its second Civil War. In fact, with the obvious and enormous exception of attitudes toward slavery, Americans are more divided morally, ideologically, and politically today than they were during the Civil War.

—Dennis Prager²

Quotations like the preceding illustrate what academics refer to as “conventional wisdom.” This instance of conventional wisdom sprouted in the early 2000s, took deep root during the 2004 George Bush–John Kerry presidential race, and has continued to grow ever since.³ It holds that the United States is a deeply polarized country, probably more so than at any time since the Civil War (notably overlooking more than a half-century of labor violence from 1870–1930, not to mention the 1960s).⁴ In the past two decades only a very brief period of thermidor between Obama’s victory in 2008 and the rise of the Tea Party temporarily called the conventional wisdom into question.

Culture War: The Myth of a Polarized America (2004) was a first attempt to counter the burgeoning conventional wisdom.⁵ Putting forth a “man bites dog” argument, the book received extensive discussion in the media.⁶ Its central thesis was soon forgotten, however. *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (2011) was a second attempt.⁷ As an academic book it received much less attention. *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting and Party Stalemate* (2017), the predecessor of this essay series, seemingly had no impact at all.⁸ Nothing in the data then or now suggests that I should renounce these earlier

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arguments, however; so, once more unto the breach, dear friends.⁹ As Chico Marx might have said, “Who you gonna believe, the data or your own eyes?”¹⁰

WHERE’S THE POLARIZATION?

As elementary statistics courses often note, in the natural world many variables, such as height, weight, or intelligence, follow a bell-shaped or normal distribution as depicted in the top panel of figure 1. Most observations fall close to the center and become rarer toward the extremes. In contrast, the bottom panel illustrates a “polarized” distribution, with most observations occurring in the tails of the distribution and few in the middle. Many observers claim that in past decades distributions of American political attitudes looked like the top panel but now look like the bottom panel. As James Pierson writes, “The number of people and the percentage of the electorate at the center have gradually diminished over time. Public opinion now appears to divide us up to the point that we have a couple of lumps—a liberal lump on one side and a conservative lump on the other.”¹¹ So, if we consider, say, political ideology, believers in a polarized America would contend that the United States has divided into liberals and conservatives with few moderates in between.

Is this true?

For five decades, academic survey organizations have asked Americans to characterize their ideologies. Figure 2 summarizes the data from one such organization, the General Social Survey (GSS). Contrary to claims like Pierson’s quoted earlier, there is little change over the half-century even as millions of older voters left the electorate and were replaced by younger

FIGURE 1 Two contrasting political distributions

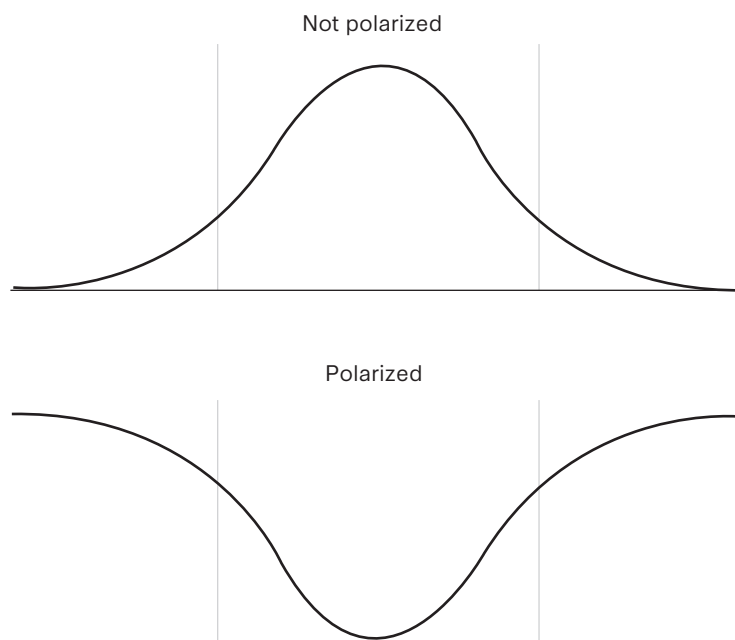
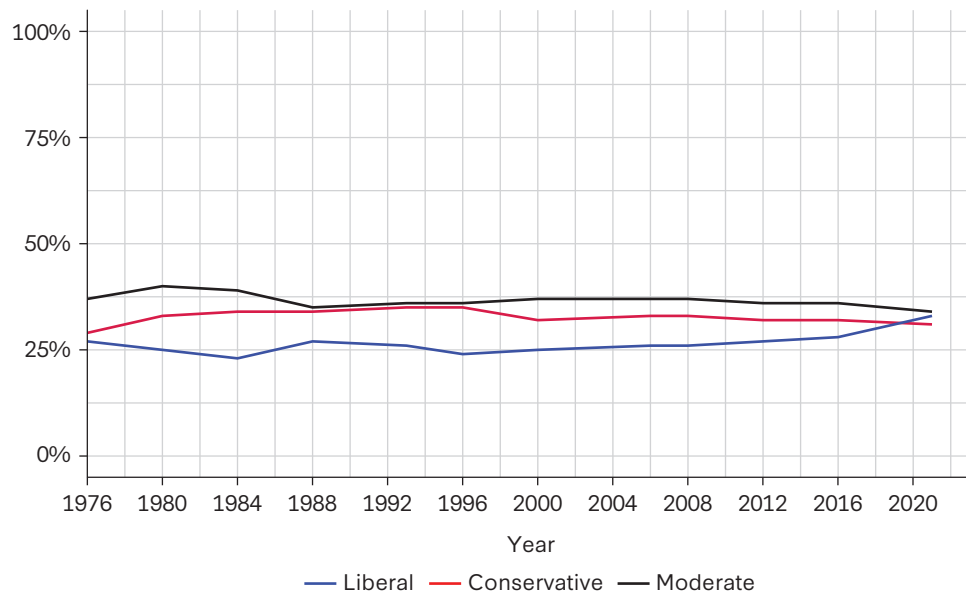


FIGURE 2 No change in ideological self-identifications



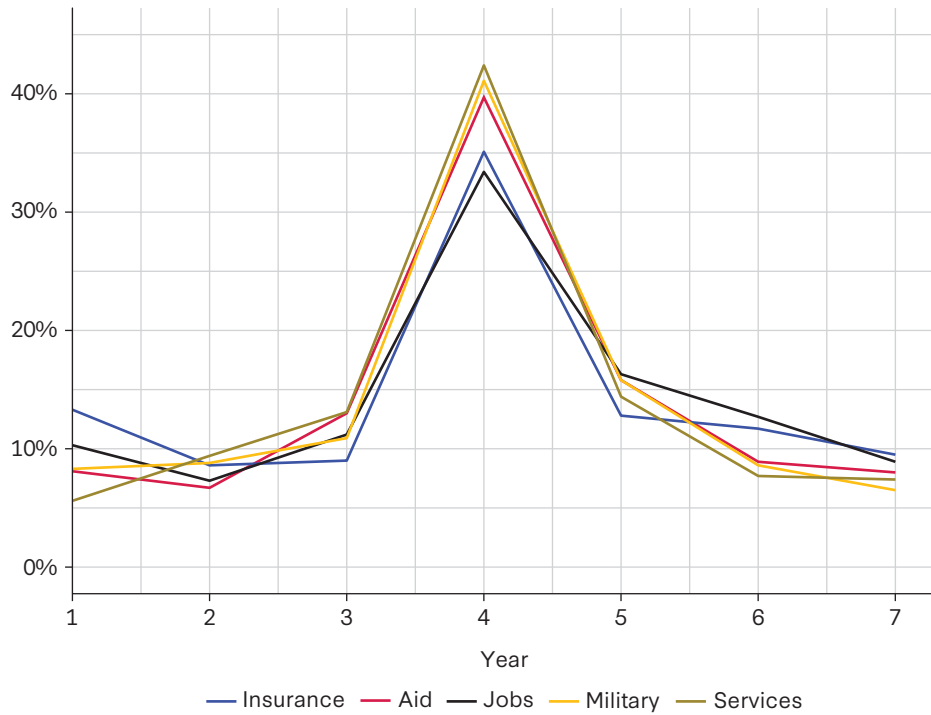
Source: General Social Survey

ones. The data show a liberal lump and a conservative lump, but an even larger middle-of-the-road lump. There is essentially no trend except for a small rise in liberal identification during the period of the “great awakening” since 2011.¹² Even this apparent movement might be exaggerated because of pandemic-created survey difficulties.¹³

Perhaps ideology is not an appropriate measure. According to another major survey organization, over the same period, between one-fifth to one-third of the electorate report that they don’t know what they are, ideologically speaking.¹⁴ That is because many, if not most, Americans look at specific issues without putting them in a broader ideological context.¹⁵ The American National Election Study (ANES) includes such issue-specific questions. The time series is not as lengthy as the ideology series, but five issues have a reasonably long representation in the data. Between 1984 and 2020 survey respondents were invited to position themselves on seven-point scales ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Although these issue distributions show some increase in extreme positions over the past thirty-six years, the shape of the contemporary distribution in figure 3b still resembles the upper panel of figure 1 far more closely than the bottom panel. Even on some of the past decade’s most contentious issues such as healthcare, the proportions who hold extreme positions like adopting a single-payer model or leaving everything to insurance companies are far smaller than the proportions who espouse something in between.

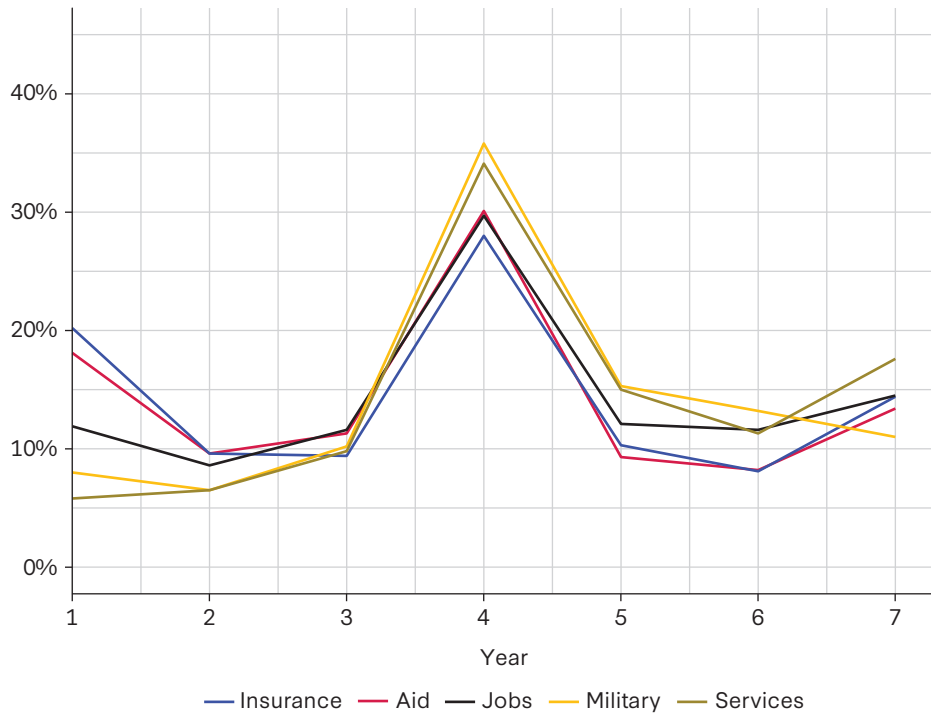
Still, a long tradition in political science holds that most people do not have firm positions on political issues—and even that a significant number adopt whatever positions their preferred candidates advocate. For example, studies found in 2016 that some voters first decided whom to vote for and then adopted the economic and cultural positions of that candidate.¹⁶

FIGURE 3A Issue positions are centrist (1984)



Source: American National Election Studies

FIGURE 3B Issue positions remain centrist (2020)



Source: American National Election Studies

Other studies similarly report that issue preferences change with candidate preferences.¹⁷ But there are a few “easy” issues that are the exception to such arguments.¹⁸ Abortion is one such issue, a long-standing controversy that some consider the single most important contributor to the “culture war.” One recent study found that abortion was the only issue in the modern period for which people would change their party identification to agree with their issue stance, rather than vice versa.¹⁹ The GSS has queried Americans about their views on abortion for five decades, with the starting date in 1972, just before the 1973 *Roe* decision. Respondents answer the following question battery:

Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion . . .

if pregnancy endangers the woman’s health

if the woman has become pregnant as a result of rape

if there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby

if she does not want any more children

if her family is very low income and cannot afford more children

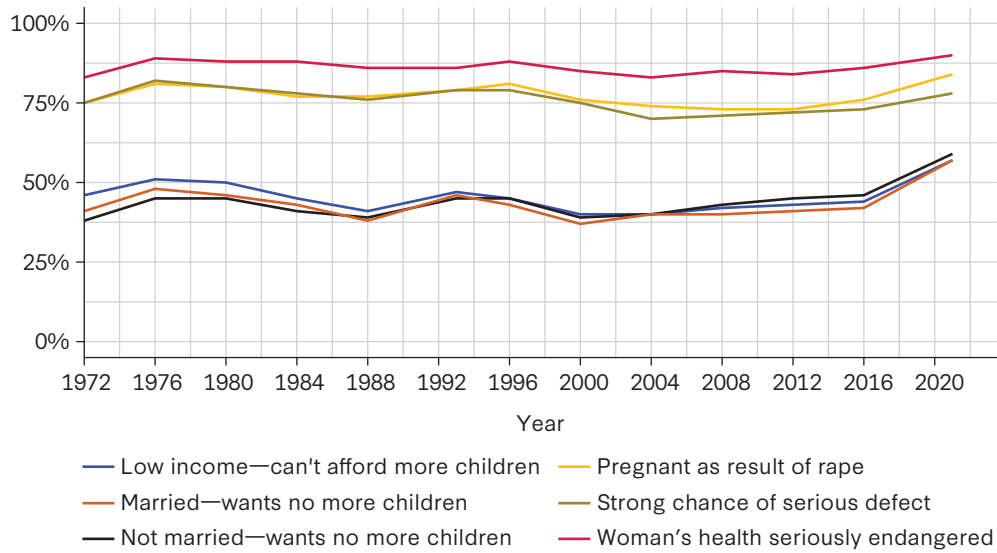
if she is unmarried and does not want to marry the man.

Once again, the data surprise. Figure 4 shows that, although there is a clear uptick in pro-choice views in the three elective circumstances between 2016 and 2022, before that time there was little movement on the issue for more than four decades while millions of voters entered and exited the electorate and polarization supposedly surged. Large majorities favored abortion in the so-called traumatic conditions while splitting nearly evenly about the more “elective” conditions.²⁰ The average American believed that abortion should be legal in about four of the six circumstances, with a large plurality adopting positions between the extreme zero and six poles.

A less specific Gallup survey item first asked in 1975 shows similar continuity (figure 5). The item reads, “Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?” Once again, for about a half-century “any” and “none” are chosen much less frequently than “only under certain circumstances,” which half the country supports.

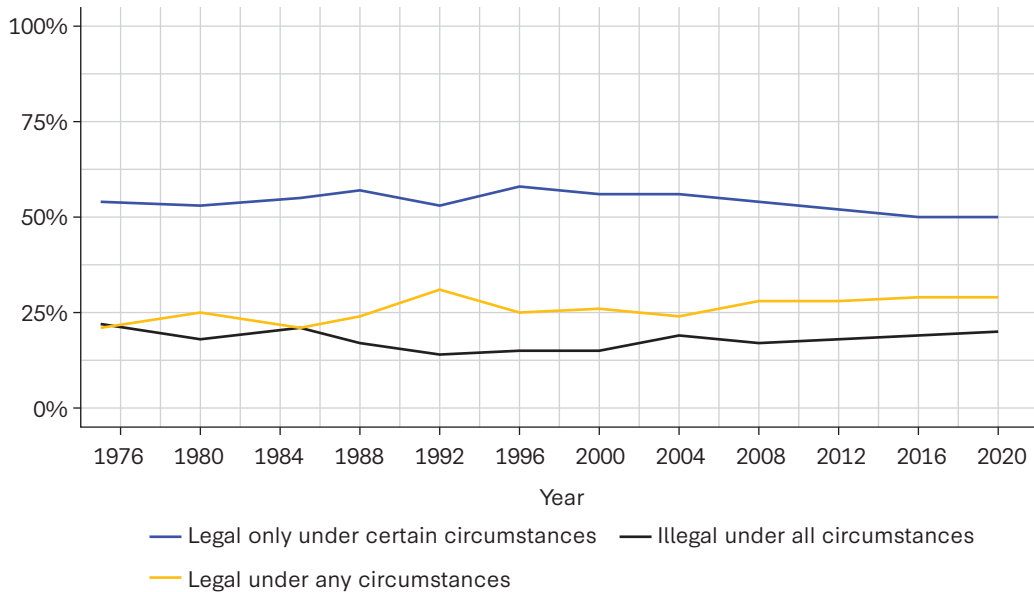
For a slightly shorter period the ANES has posed a different question: “By law, when should abortion be allowed?” And again, figure 6 shows little change in Americans’ views. Support for the most liberal position has trended slightly upward over the past two decades, but the item shows little movement overall.²¹

FIGURE 4 Pregnant women should be able to obtain an abortion if . . .



Source: General Social Survey

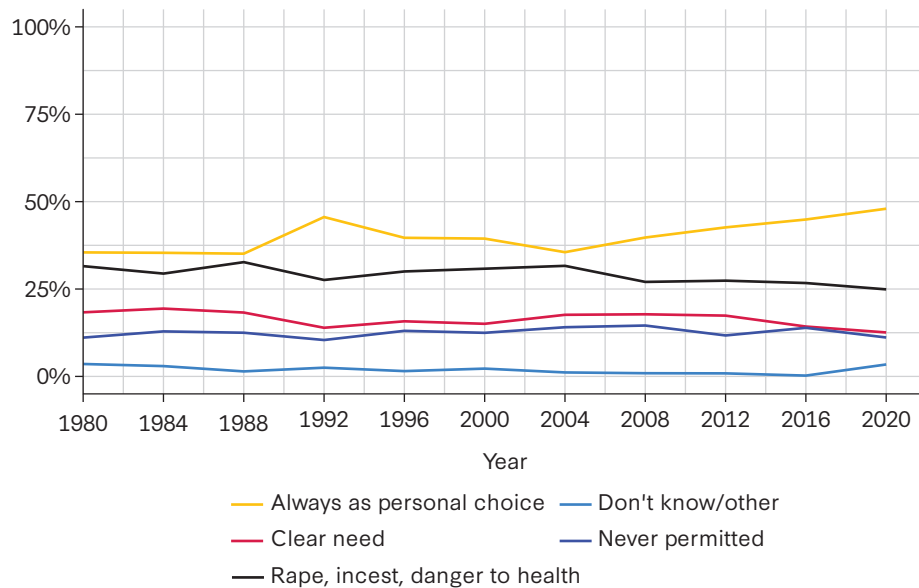
FIGURE 5 Do you think abortion should be . . . ?



Source: Gallup

To some extent polarization is in the eye of the beholder; yet, whatever one's view, and contrary to what some commentators assert, polarization on abortion has changed little over the past half-century.²² For decades surveys nearly always measured support for *Roe* to fall in the mid-60s percentage range. Americans have long differed on exactly where to draw the line, but large majorities have always drawn it far from the "always" or "never" points where abortion issue activists would draw it.

FIGURE 6 By law, when should abortion be allowed?



Source: American National Election Studies

Surprisingly, the much-publicized *Dobbs* decision in June 2022 that overturned *Roe* did little to change public opinion on the issue. Consistent with past support for *Roe*, recent polls report that more than 60 percent of Americans disapprove of the decision, and their specific views on abortion did not show any notable movements after the Court handed down the *Dobbs* decision.²³ The Pew Research Center asks a question that is similar to Gallup’s in their trends panel and reports little change. Table 1 compares the distributions almost two years after *Dobbs* with the distribution two years before.

The failure of restrictive abortion laws and initiatives to gain popular support in state elections after *Dobbs* illustrates the electorate’s general acceptance of the framework established by *Roe*.

If general ideology or specific policy issues do not show the oft-claimed polarization of Americans, maybe polarization can be found in something more primordial: our identities—us versus them, my team versus your team, Republican versus Democrat. Perhaps polarization is not something that occurs on the cognitive level but instead on an emotional or affective level. This brings up the topic of “affective polarization,” one of the more active political science research programs of the past decade or so. A subsequent critical essay will deal at length with this topic, but for now, consider this observation.

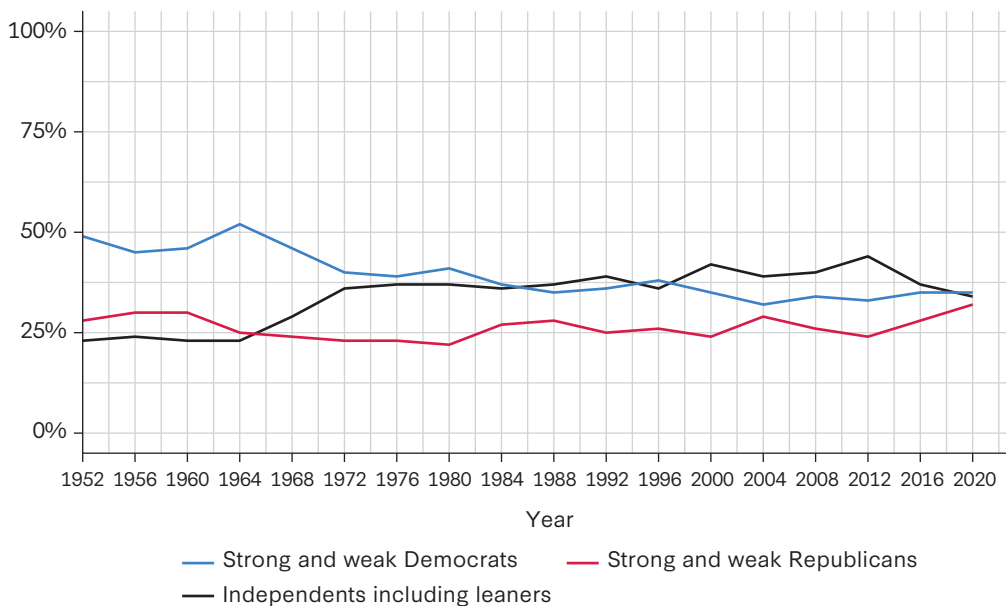
The view that Americans have split down the middle into two warring partisan camps has one obvious problem: far more Americans belong to neither camp than they did a generation ago in the prepolarization era. For nearly three-quarters of a century, the ANES has presented Americans with the following survey battery (figure 7): “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” If the response

TABLE 1 PUBLIC OPINION ON ABORTION BEFORE AND AFTER DOBBS

	Jan 22–Feb 2, 2020 (%)	Apr 8–14, 2024 (%)
Legal in all cases	25	25
Legal in most cases	35	38
Illegal in most cases	27	28
Illegal in all cases	11	8

Source: “Broad Public Support for Legal Abortion Persists 2 Years After Dobbs,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/05/13/broad-public-support-for-legal-abortion-persists-2-years-after-dobbs/>.

FIGURE 7 Not a 50/50 partisan nation—closer to a 33/33/33 nation



Source: American National Election Studies

is Democrat or Republican, the respondent is classified as a partisan, and the interviewer proceeds to a strength of identification probe: “Would you call yourself a strong Republican [Democrat] or a not very strong Republican [Democrat]? If the answer to the stem question is Independent, however, the interviewer next asks, “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?”

In the 1950s about three-quarters of the electorate reported Democratic or Republican identification, with only a small minority in the independent category. In the ensuing years Democrats lost adherents, but rather than the Republicans gaining them to produce a more polarized half-Republican and half-Democratic electorate, the general trend was for fewer and fewer

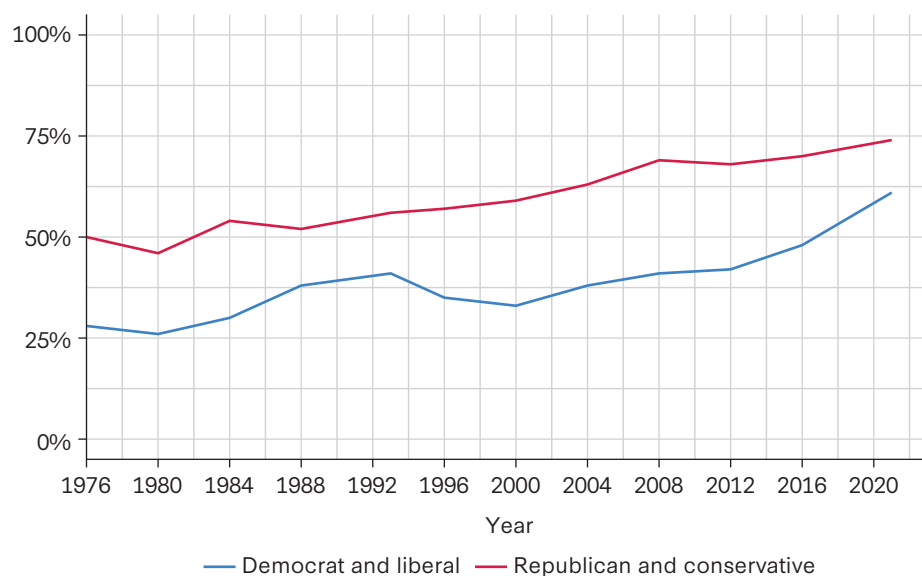
Americans to admit identifying with either party. In the spring of 2023 Gallup reported that the proportion of independents in its surveys had reached an all-time high.²⁴ There are numerous claims in the academic and popular literature that most of the independents are “closet partisans,” a generalization that rests on weak supporting evidence and ignores contrary evidence.²⁵ But even if the claim were completely true, how widespread or strong could partisan identities be if less than 60 percent of the electorate will even admit that they have one?

In sum, claims that the United States of America has divided into the Divided States of America find little support in the data. Yet, American politics over the course of the past few decades indisputably seems nastier and less productive than in earlier periods. One explanation for this apparent contradiction is simple: as discussed in Essay 1, “Historical Context: An Era of Tenuous Majorities Continues,” the American electorate in the aggregate has not polarized, but the two parties have.

WHAT DID HAPPEN: NOT POLARIZATION, BUT PARTY SORTING

Let us dig deeper into the data underlying figures 2 and 6, which both show little change in the American electorate over the past half-century. Figure 8 divides the data in figure 2 into Democrats and Republicans. The proportion of Democrats who classified themselves as liberals more than doubled between the 1970s and today. In 1980 there were as many Democratic conservatives as there were liberals, whereas the ratio is now 5:1 in favor of liberals. The picture is similar for Republicans. With the exception of the George H. W. Bush years, there has been a fairly steady rise from 50 percent or so conservative to nearly 75 percent of Republicans now. Like conservative Democrats, liberal Republicans now register in the single digits. Whereas both parties historically contained both liberals and conservatives, today’s Democrats are a liberal party, and today’s Republicans are a conservative party.

FIGURE 8 Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans



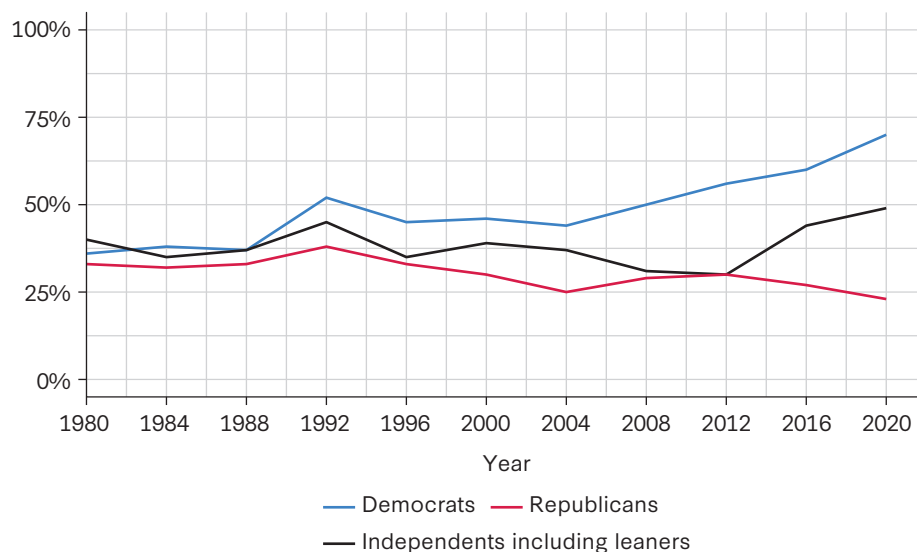
Source: General Social Survey

Now consider figure 9, which divides Americans' views on abortion by party. Until the early 1990s when the *Webster* and *Casey* decisions were handed down, the average Republican and Democrat did not differ much on abortion. But then the process of sorting began and has accelerated since.

What the preceding figures show is that the parties have *sorted*: Democrats have moved in one direction and Republicans the opposite. These changes largely offset so the aggregate distributions of opinion shown earlier do not change very much. Analyses such as these have been replicated across other issues and political beliefs.²⁶ Although the political views of the electorate at large have changed little in recent decades, the distributions of those views across the two parties have changed dramatically. We could call this development *party polarization*, but I use the term “party sorting” for two reasons. First, political views have not become more extreme, but have become more consistent, as explained later. Second, commentators too often omit the modifier “party” when discussing party polarization; some younger scholars even *define* polarization as party sorting.²⁷ According to that definition however, 1860 would not qualify as a polarized period because that election did not pit one party against the other. Lest readers think this is an exaggerated claim, a recent history of party polarization, in fact, does omit the Civil War because it was not a case of *party polarization*.²⁸

Even in the modern era there are examples of polarization in the electorate where deep political divisions do not pit one party against the other. Take race in the late 1950s to the early 1970s when the Democratic Party contained both voters most opposed to further civil rights advances and those most supportive, while Republicans were in between. This was a time of considerable popular polarization on civil rights but not party polarization. Another example from a slightly later era would be public opinion on the continuation of the Vietnam War in the

FIGURE 9 Partisan sorting on abortion: abortion should always be permitted



Source: American National Election Studies

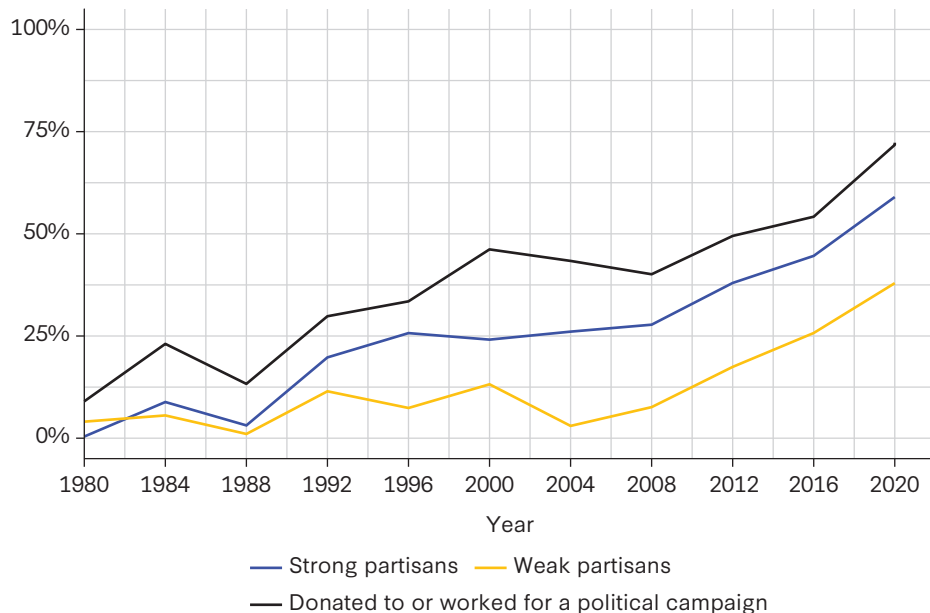
late 1960s. The Democrats were the party of both antiwar protestors and police and blue-collar “hardhats” who brutalized the protestors. In both cases popular polarization was significant and led to violence far more often than in the current era, but the parties were not yet sorted. Polarization over the war took place largely *within* the Democratic Party.

SOME ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

The sorting process that has occurred in recent decades has three features that should be noted before moving on. First, the process began earlier and has proceeded more completely among the most active participants in politics than among the less active and involved. Candidates and elected officials are very well sorted, as much literature reports.²⁹ So are donors and assorted activists. Strong partisans are not as sorted as activists but are better sorted than weaker partisans. Figure 10 illustrates the gradations of sorting in the case of abortion.

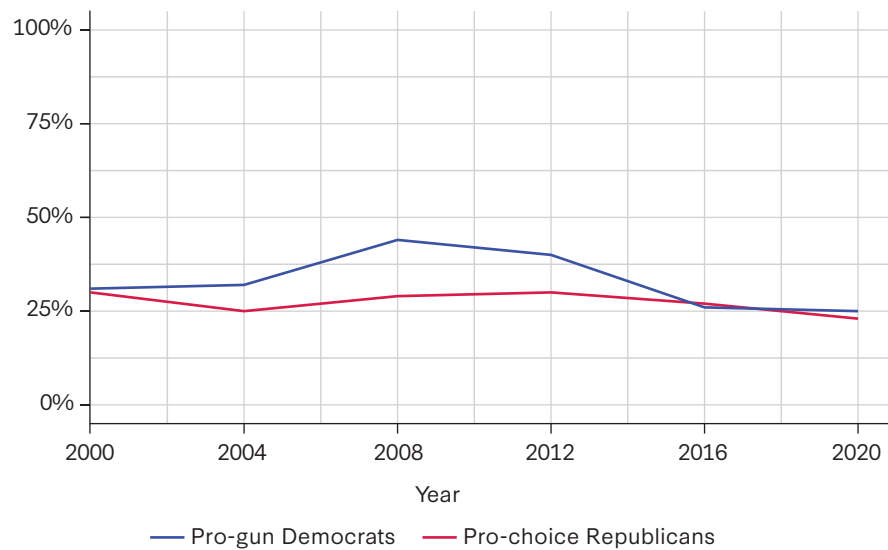
Second, the sorting is by no means perfect. Joe Manchin may be a unicorn in the Senate, but more Democrats like him exist in the larger electorate, albeit they are much less numerous than they used to be. Candidates bundle issue positions, and voters gradually adopt those bundles (or sometimes not).³⁰ Figure 11 may surprise many readers. Although minorities in their parties, about one-quarter of self-identified Republicans are out of synch with their party on abortion, believing that it always is a matter of a woman’s choice. A similar proportion of Democrats are out of synch with their national party platform in opposing proposals to strengthen gun laws. And independents, of course, are even less well sorted. The electorate as a whole is not nearly as well sorted as their elected representatives.

FIGURE 10 Partisan sorting on when abortion should be permitted increases with political involvement



Source: American National Election Studies

FIGURE 11 Some partisans remain out of sync with their parties



Notes: Percentage of Republicans who say abortion should always be legal as a personal choice versus percentage of Democrats who want to keep gun laws the same or want to make it easier to purchase a gun.

Source: American National Election Studies

Third—and this is an important point, although somewhat more technical—Americans’ views are no more extreme than they used to be. Party sorting means that political opinions have become more ideologically *consistent*. A pro-choice voter today is also more likely to be a racial and economic liberal than previously. This is why when issues such as those graphed in figure 3 are combined into an index, public opinion appears to have become more polarized. But changes in such indexes reflect increased consistency of the underlying issue positions, not greater extremity.³¹

CONCLUSION

The political changes that have occurred during the past few decades have left us with two parties that are more internally homogeneous than in times past and more distinct from each other. To put a bit of qualitative imagery on the data presented in this essay, consider the following timeline of events in national politics:

In 1964 southern Democrats filibustered the civil rights bill for fifty-seven days. Twenty-seven Republican Senators joined northern Democrats to break the filibuster.

In 1972 environmental activists targeted the “Dirty Dozen” antienvironmental members of Congress for defeat. Five of the dozen were Democrats, including the chairman of the House Interior Committee who was defeated in the primary.

In 1981 the House of Representatives passed Republican President Reagan’s tax cuts. Phil Gramm, a Democrat from Texas, managed the bill in the House, and forty-eight Democrats joined the minority Republicans to pass it.

In the 1990s, gun control legislation was regularly slowed, weakened, or both in the House of Representatives by Energy and Commerce Chair John Dingell, a Democrat who served on the board of the NRA.

Fast forward to the current century:

In 2001 Congress passed Republican President Bush’s tax cuts. Only 13 Democratic representatives (of 209) voted for it. Only 10 (of 50) Democratic senators voted for it.

In 2010 Congress passed Democratic President Obama’s Affordable Care Act. No (zero) Republican senators or representatives voted for it.

In 2022 Congress passed Democratic President Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act. No (zero) Republican senators or representatives voted for it.

The difference between the cross-party coalitions that supported major legislation before 2000 and the partisan coalitions in the Congresses since then are the reflections of party sorting, aka *partisan* polarization.

NEXT: WHAT ABOUT AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION?

NOTES

1. Simon Schama, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” November 5, 2004, <http://renew.com/general59/cche.htm>.
2. Dennis Prager. 2017. “America’s Second Civil War,” January 24, 2017, <https://dennisprager.com/column/americas-second-civil-war>.
3. Morris Fiorina, “A Divider, Not a Uniter—Did It Have to Be?” in *The George W. Bush Legacy*, edited by Colin Campbell, Bert A. Rockman, and Andrew Rudalevige (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2007), 92–111.
4. To be discussed in Essay 10 of this series.
5. Morris Fiorina, with Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004).
6. Wayne Baker, “Social Science in the Public Interest: To What Extent Did the Media Cover ‘Culture War?’ The Myth of a Polarized America?” *The Forum* 3, no. 2, January 2005, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40823276_Social_Science_in_the_Public_Interest_To_What_Extent_Did_the_Media_Cover_Culture_War_The_Myth_of_a_Polarized_America.
7. Morris Fiorina, with Samuel Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).
8. Morris Fiorina, *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting and Political Stalemate* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2017).

9. From William Shakespeare's *Henry V*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56972/speech-once-more-onto-the-breach-dear-friends-once-more>.
10. From the classic movie *Duck Soup*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHxGUe1cjzM>.
11. Quoted in Andrew Soergel, "Divided We Stand," *US News and World Report*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-07-19/political-polarization-drives-presidential-race-to-the-bottom>.
12. Musa al-Gharbi, *We Have Never Been Woke* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024).
13. The pandemic prevented face-to-face interviewing that these survey organizations had always done in the past. Studies find that "web respondents appear to be more politically knowledgeable, ideologically constrained, and have greater correspondence between issue and vote preferences compared to face-to-face or phone respondents." Thus, other things being equal, we would have expected to see more liberals and conservatives in 2020. See Enrijeta Shino and Michael D. Martinez, "The Different Faces of Public Opinion: Is the American Voter Tinted by Mode?" *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 33 (2021): 756–78.
14. "ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior," American National Election Study, 2023, https://electionstudies.org/data-tools/anes-guide/anes-guide.html?chart=lib_con_identification_7_pt.
15. See, e.g., Donald R. Kinder and Nathan P. Kalmoe, *Neither Liberal nor Conservative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
16. Peter K. Enns and Ashley Jardina, "Complicating the Role of White Racial Attitudes and Immigrant Sentiment in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85 (2021): 539–70.
17. See, e.g., Andres M. Engelhardt, "Racial Attitudes Through a Partisan Lens," *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 33 (2020): 1062–79.
18. Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, "Two Faces of Issue Voting," *American Political Science Review* 74 (1980): 78–91.
19. Robert S. Erikson, "Abortion Opinion and Partisan Choice: Untangling the Causal Dynamics," *Political Science Quarterly*, May 3, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqae041>.
20. These are terms commonly used by researchers in this area.
21. Responses to "Always as personal choice" (and to a similar item in the GSS) should be treated with caution because a significant fraction of respondents who offer that response rethink it when queried more closely. In an ANES pilot study about 30 percent of respondents who chose the "always" option in one survey rejected gender selection when subsequently offered that justification for abortion in a subsequent survey. Similarly, GSS researchers report that 20 percent of respondents who answer that abortion should NOT be legal in one of the six circumstances chose "always legal," seemingly contradicting themselves. Sarah K. Cowan, Michael Hout, and Stuart Perrett, "Updating a Time-Series of Survey Questions: The Case of Abortion Attitudes in the General Social Survey," *Sociological Methods & Research* 53, no. 1 (2022): 193–234.
22. In striking contrast, support for gay marriage moved rapidly from not polarized (large majorities against) to polarized, to not polarized (large majorities in favor). Pew Research Center, "Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage," 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>.
23. "Abortion and Birth Control," Polling Report, 2022, <https://www.pollingreport.com/abortion.htm>.
24. Jeffrey M. Jones, "Independent Party ID Tied for High; Democratic ID at New Low," Gallup, January 12, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/548459/independent-party-tied-high-democratic-new-low.aspx>.
25. See Fiorina, *Unstable Majorities*, chap. 6.
26. Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
27. See, e.g., Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 133.
28. B. Dan Wood, with Soren Jordan, *Party Polarization in America: The War Over Two Social Contracts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
29. See, e.g., Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
30. O'Brian shows that positions on various cultural issues were correlated with race in the population long before they were bundled by candidates; hence, when such issues became salient after the racial

realignment, it was more natural for candidates to construct some issue packages than others. This is a helpful finding, but it still took activists and candidates to notice the potential market and act to stimulate and organize the latent demand. Neil O’Brian, *The Roots of Polarization: From the Racial Realignment to the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).

31. For a detailed discussion see Morris Fiorina and Matthew Levendusky, “The Political Class vs. the People,” in *Red and Blue Nation*, vol. 1, edited by Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 96–99.



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An Era of Unstable Majorities Continues

A continuation of the Hoover Institution's *Unstable Majorities* series from the 2016 election season, the first half of this essay series leads up to the November 2024 elections with general discussions of the past and present political situation, of particular interest to students and professionals in the fields of political science and political journalism. The second half continues post-election with analyses focused specifically on the 2024 elections, addressed to a wider audience. The series begins by looking back at the issues raised in 2016 that continue today.

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