

CURRENT POLITICAL PHENOMENA (30481)

Political polarization in the US

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What's the matter with Kansas?

- Polarized America: unbridgeable divide between left & right, red & blue states; bipartisanship as myth of the past

This is the year of Donald Trump. It is the year Republican primary voters applauded proposals to build fences on the border and to ban Muslims. It is the year that the leading Democrat in New Hampshire polls was a self-proclaimed socialist who favored 90 percent top tax rates and a \$15 per hour national minimum wage. It is the year we all decided once and for all that those on the other side of the political divide didn't just have different priorities, didn't just hold different opinions, but were out to destroy the country and everything it stands for (Gentzkow 2016)

As they gear up for the election, Republicans and Democrats are operating on the premise that turnout will be low and the outcome will be determined by partisan activists. Consequently, GOP leaders intent on reviving up the party's base are about to serve up as much red meat as a Kansas City steak house (Doherty 1998)

What's the matter with Kansas? (cont'd)

Today, most Americans live in communities that are becoming more politically homogeneous and, in effect, diminish dissenting views. And that grouping of like-minded people is feeding the nation's increasingly rancorous and partisan politics (Bishop 2008)

Even if there is a backlash against Starr, Republicans don't really care. They are not focused on swing voters or fence-sitters. Their strategy for the fall is clear and calculating: Appeal to the hard-core Republican base. Get them as outraged as possible. Make sure they give money and vote heavily (Roberts & Roberts 1998)

What do the data say?

- Detailed PEW report and interactive charts:

<http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>

Note: How to measure ideological consistency

Items in the Ideological Consistency Scale

Question #	Conservative Position	[OR]	Liberal Position
Q25a	Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient		Government often does a better job than people give it credit for
Q25b	Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good		Government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest
Q25c	Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return		Poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently
Q25d	The government today can't afford to do much more to help the needy		The government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt
Q25f	Blacks who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition		Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days
Q25g	Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care		Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents
Q25i	The best way to ensure peace is through military strength		Good diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace
Q25n	Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit		Business corporations make too much profit
Q50r	Stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy		Stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost
Q50u	Homosexuality should be discouraged by society		Homosexuality should be accepted by society

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Stylized facts about Congress

Source: Barber & McCarty (2015)

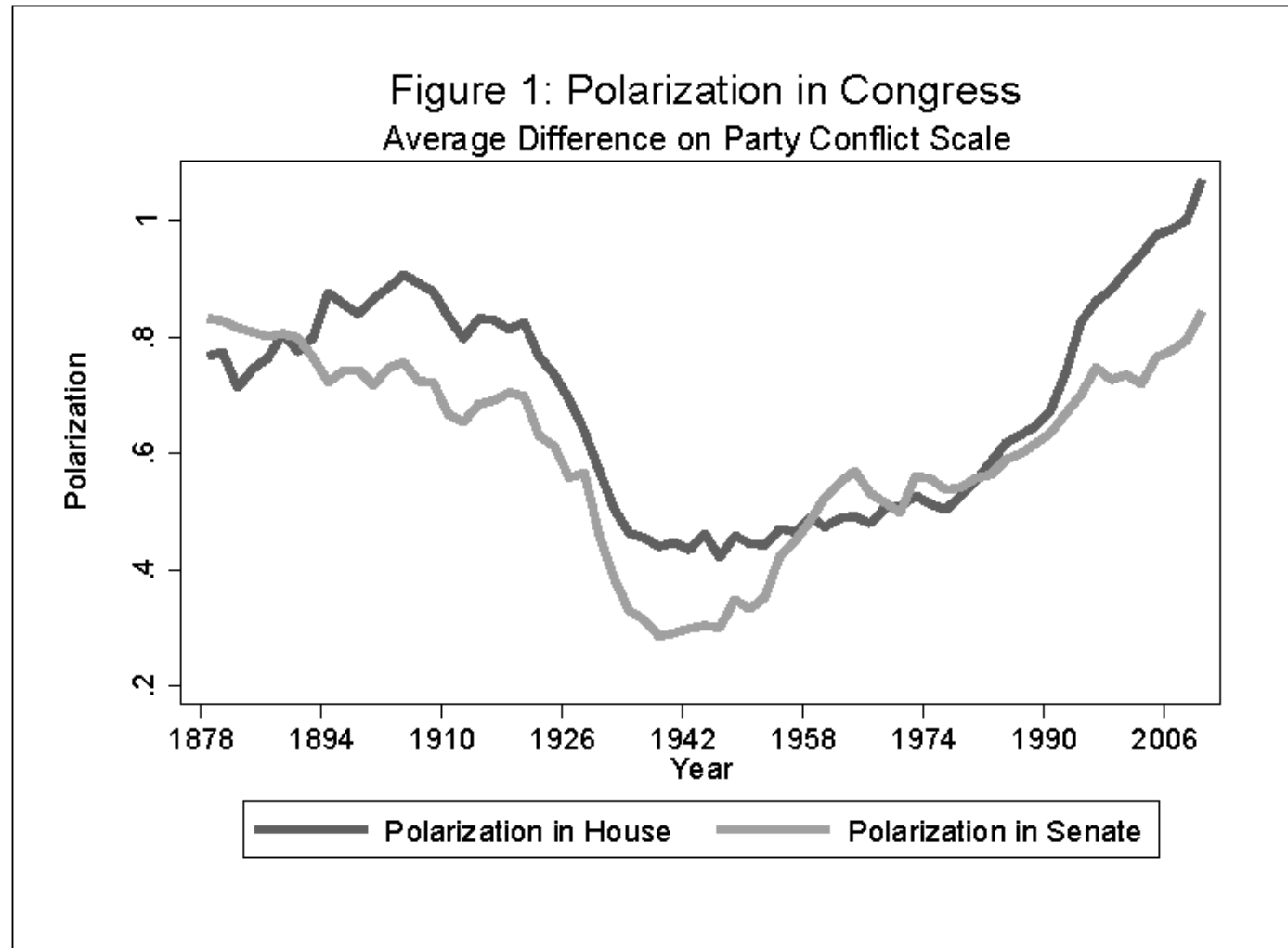


Figure 2.1: *Average Distance between Positions across Parties*. The y-axis shows the difference in mean positions between the two parties in both the House of Representatives and Senate from 1879 to 2011 using the DW-NOMINATE measures. Congress is more polarized than it has been in over 125 years.

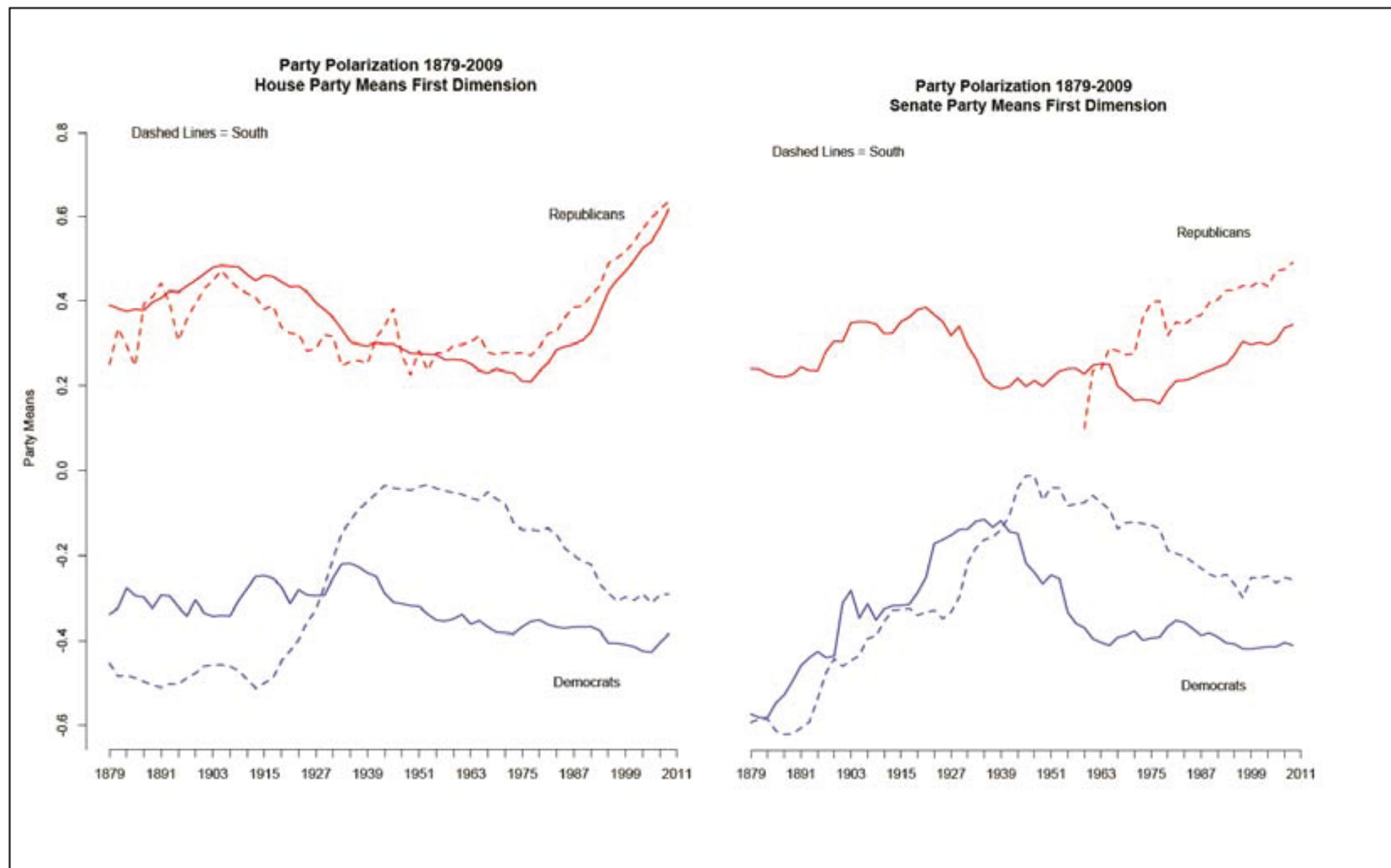


Figure 2.2: *Mean Party-Conflict Score by Party and Region*. The y-axis shows the mean position of each party by region. In this plot, the South is defined as AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, and VA. There were no Southern Republican Senators between 1913 and 1960 and only two before that.

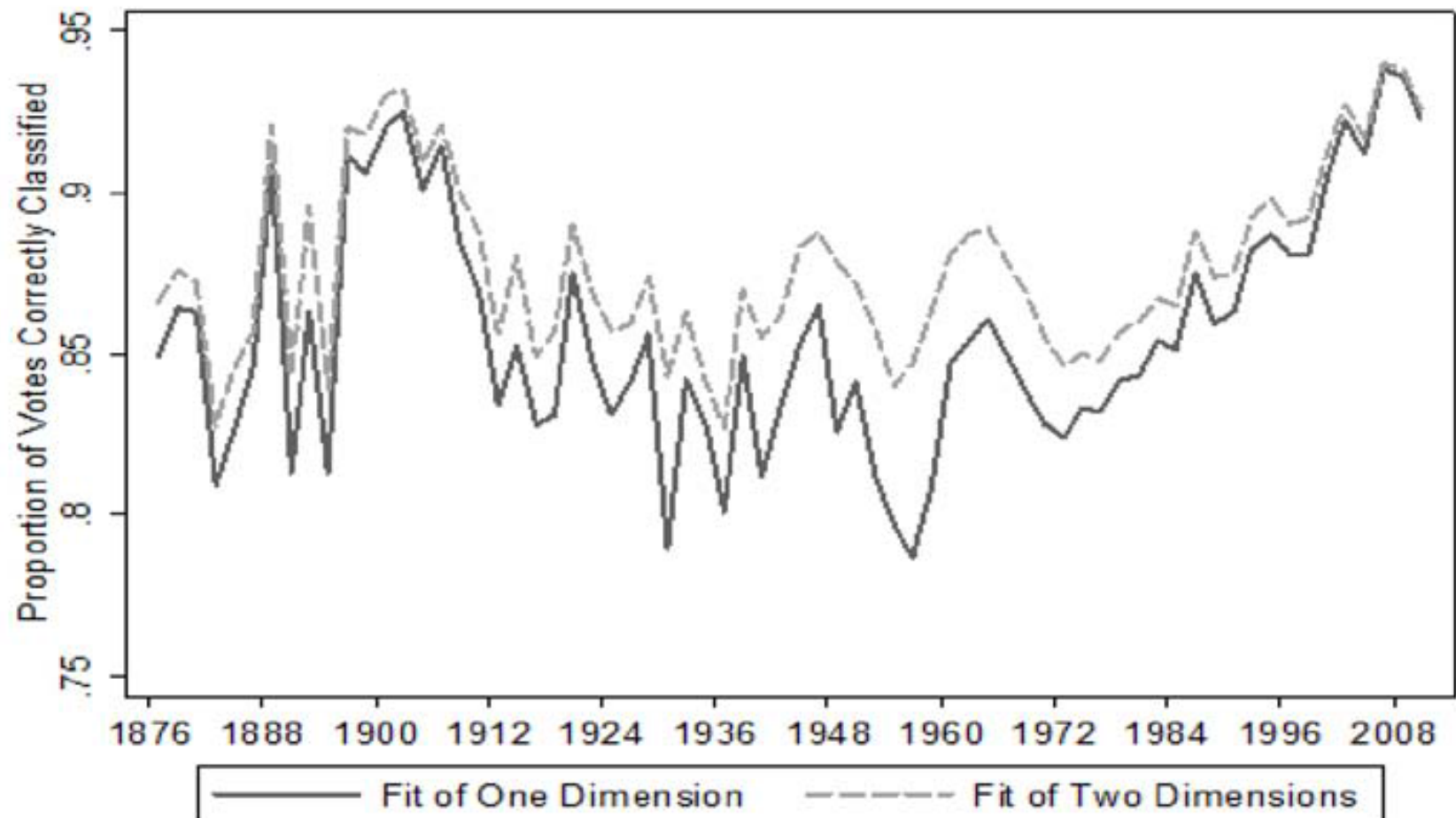
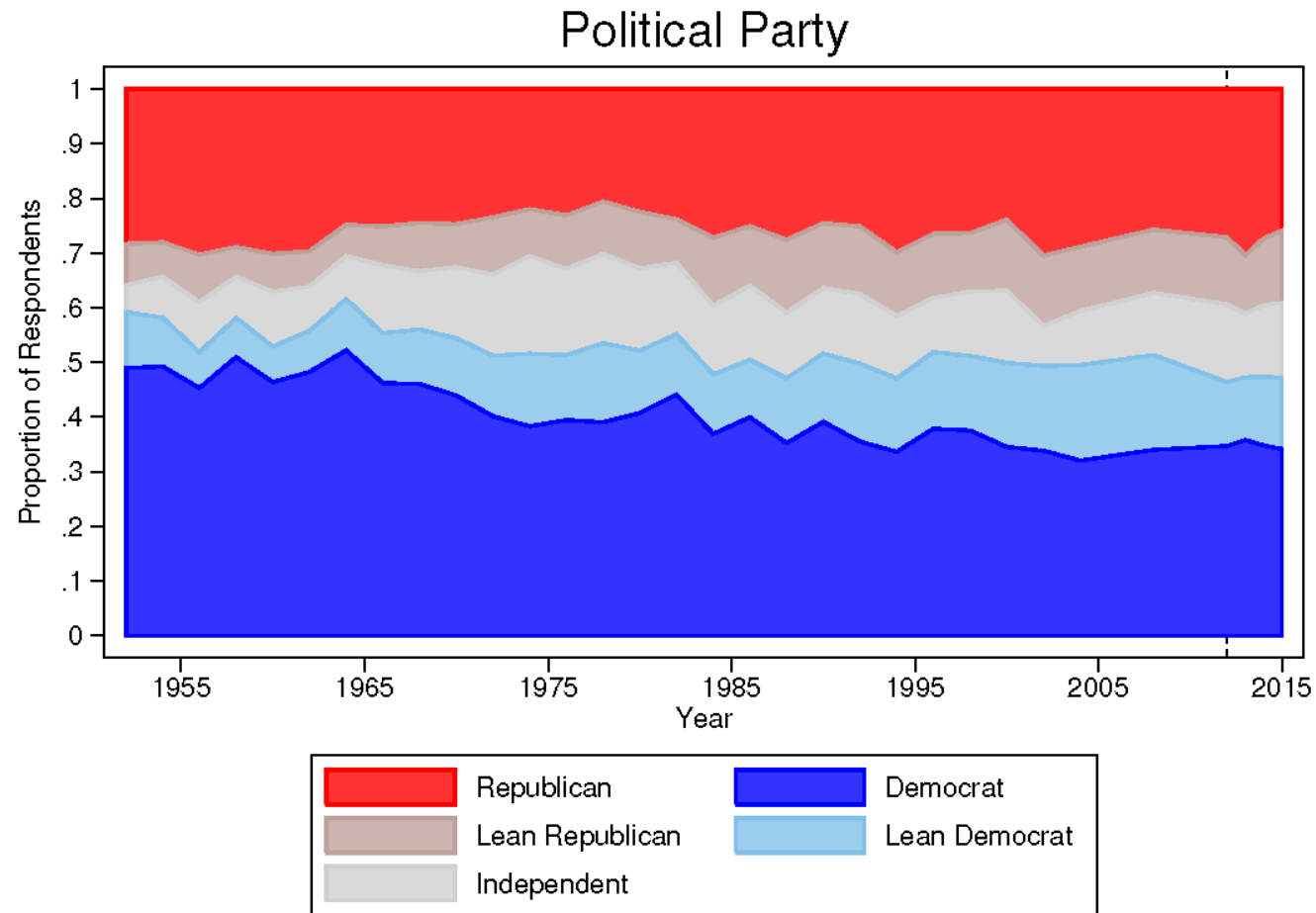


Figure 2.3: *The Classification Success of One- and Two-Dimensional DW-NOMINATE Models in the US House.* The solid line plots the proportion of House roll-call voting choice correctly predicted by a single dimension. The dashed line shows the proportion predicted when a second dimension is added. During the 1950s, a second dimension that captured intraparty divisions on race improved the prediction rate from 3% to 6% per congressional term. In recent years, the improvement has been considerably less than 0.5%.

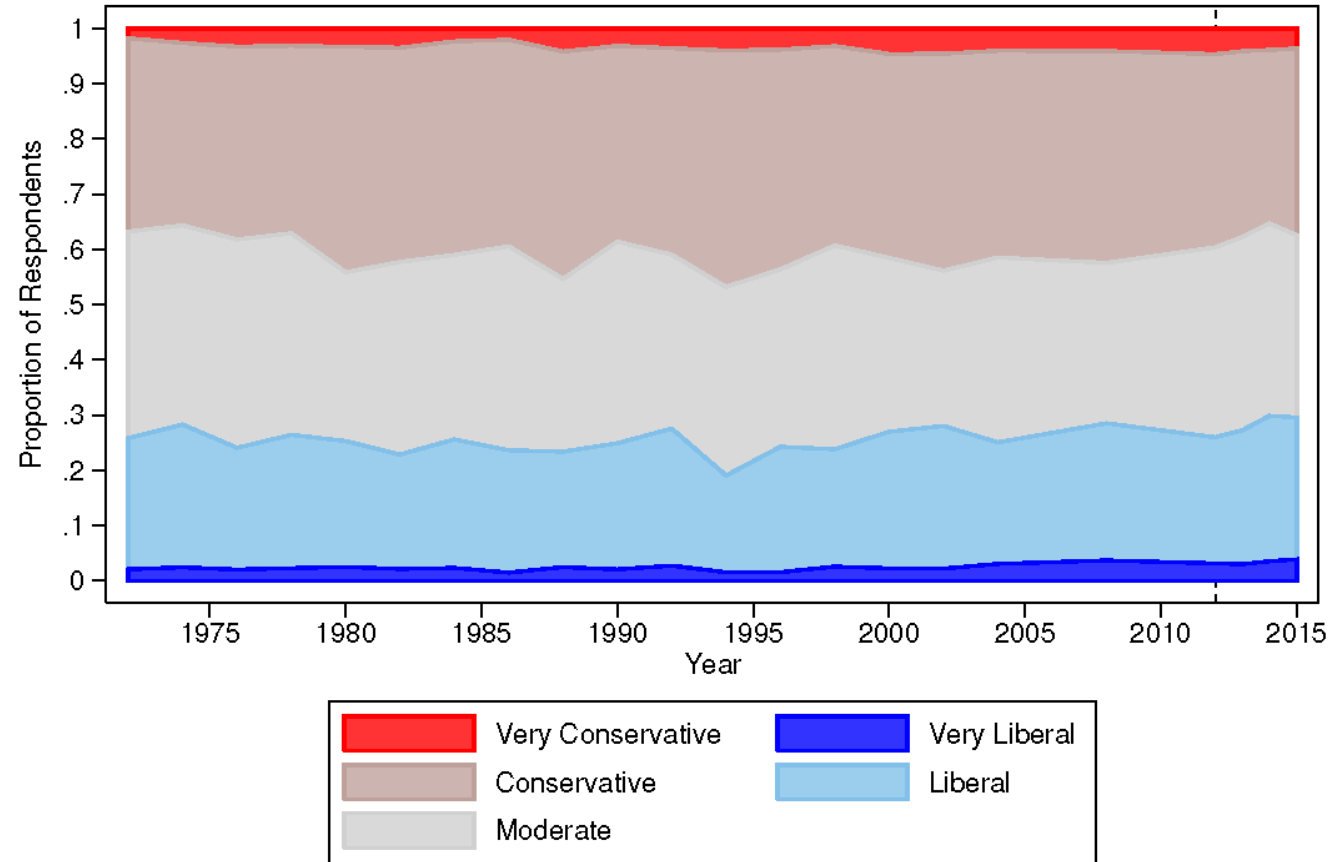
Stylized facts about voters

Source: Gentzkow (2016)



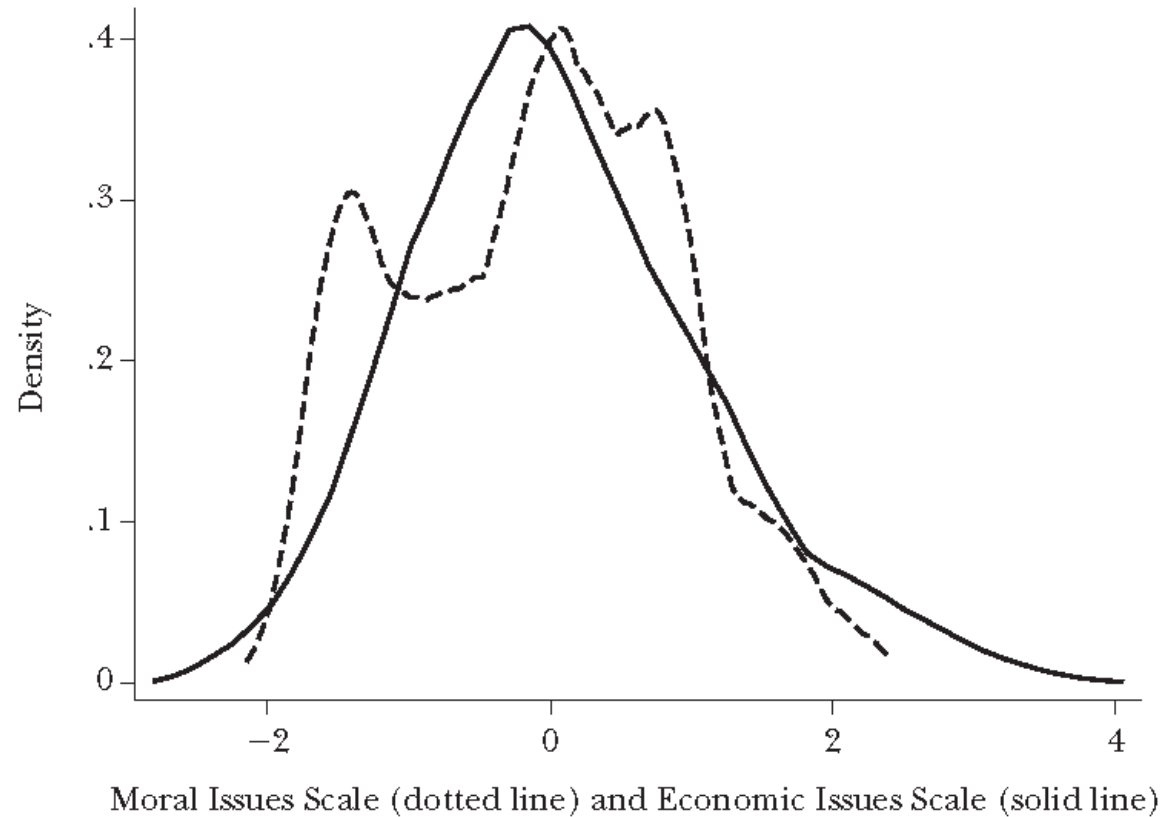
Notes: Figure shows the proportion of respondents to the American National Election Study survey who identify as Republican, lean Republican, identify as Independent, lean Democrat, or identify as Democrat. The post-2012 data comes from a separate survey conducted by the Pew Research Center and is rescaled in such a way that the overlapping time periods have the same mean.

Political Ideology



Notes: Figure shows the proportion of respondents to the American National Election Study survey who identify as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, and very liberal. The post-2012 data comes from a separate survey conducted by the Pew Research Center and is rescaled in such a way that the overlapping time periods have the same mean.

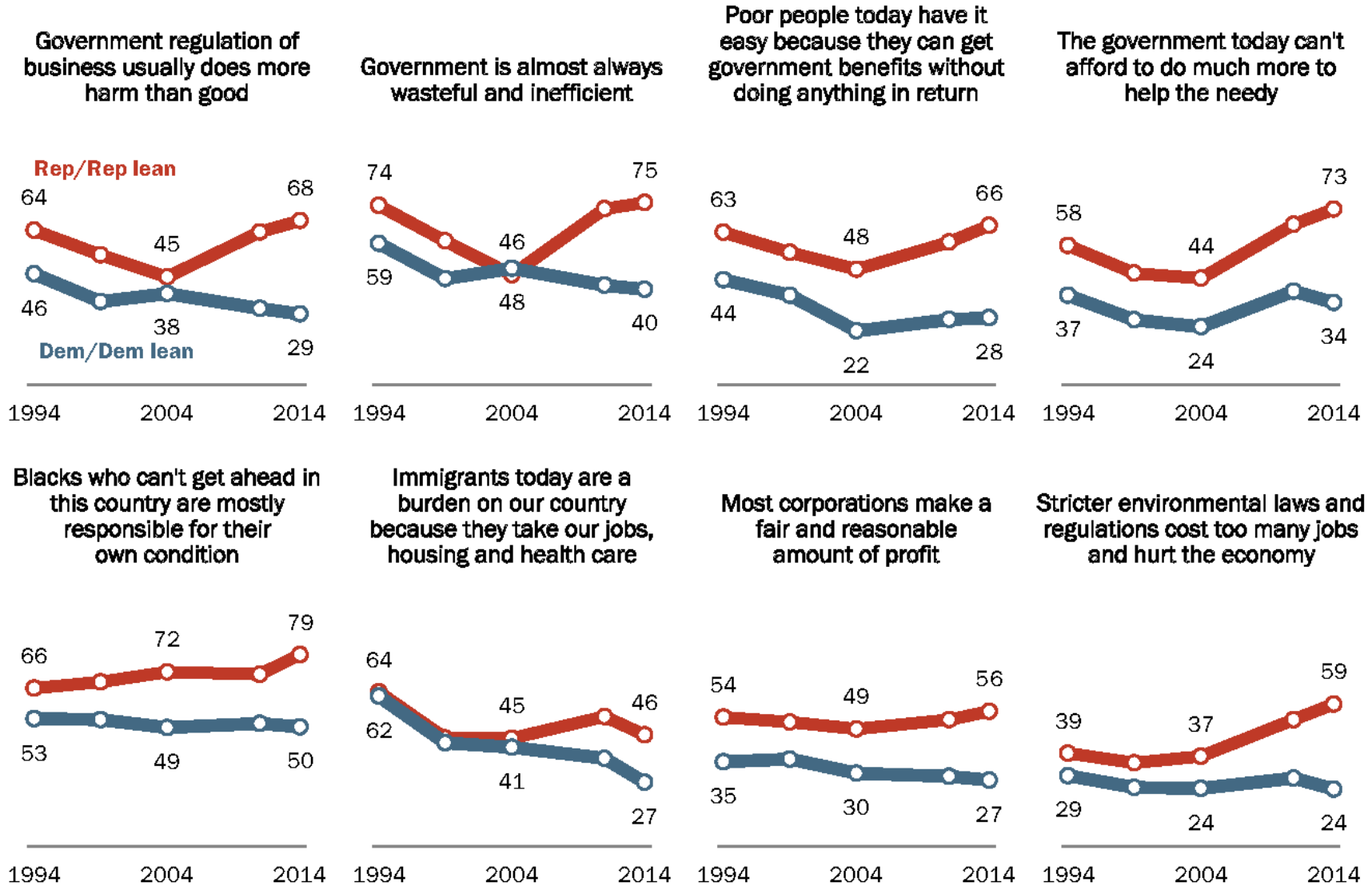
**Distribution of Voter Preferences on Economic Issues Scale
and Moral Issues Scale, 1993–2002**



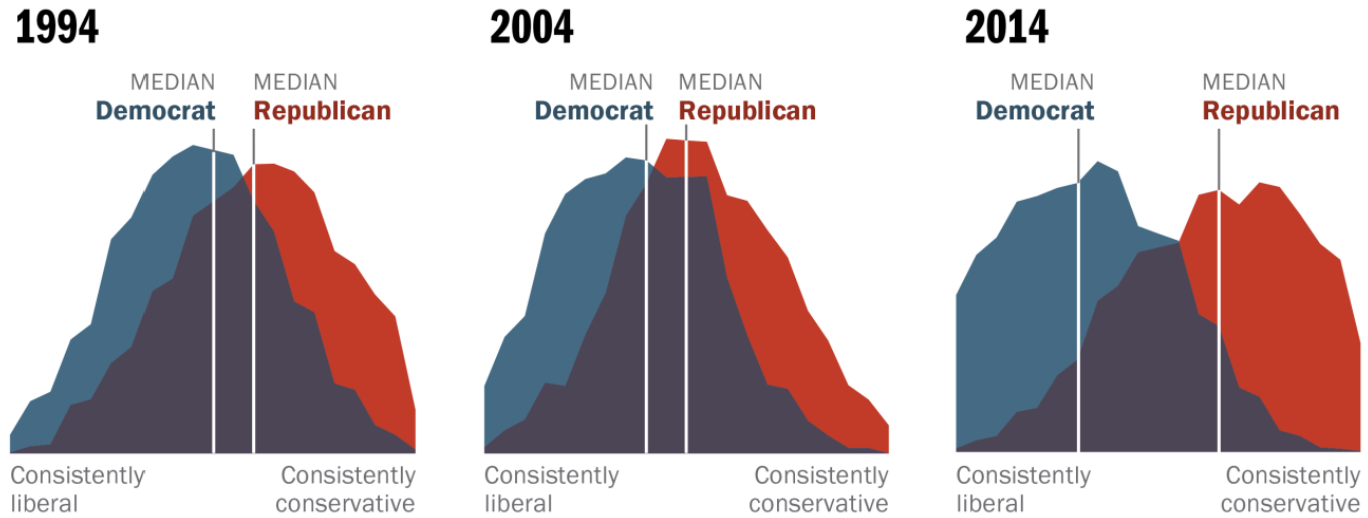
Source: Ansolabehere et al. (2006).

Growing Gaps between Republicans and Democrats

% who take the *more conservative* position on each question in the ideological consistency scale



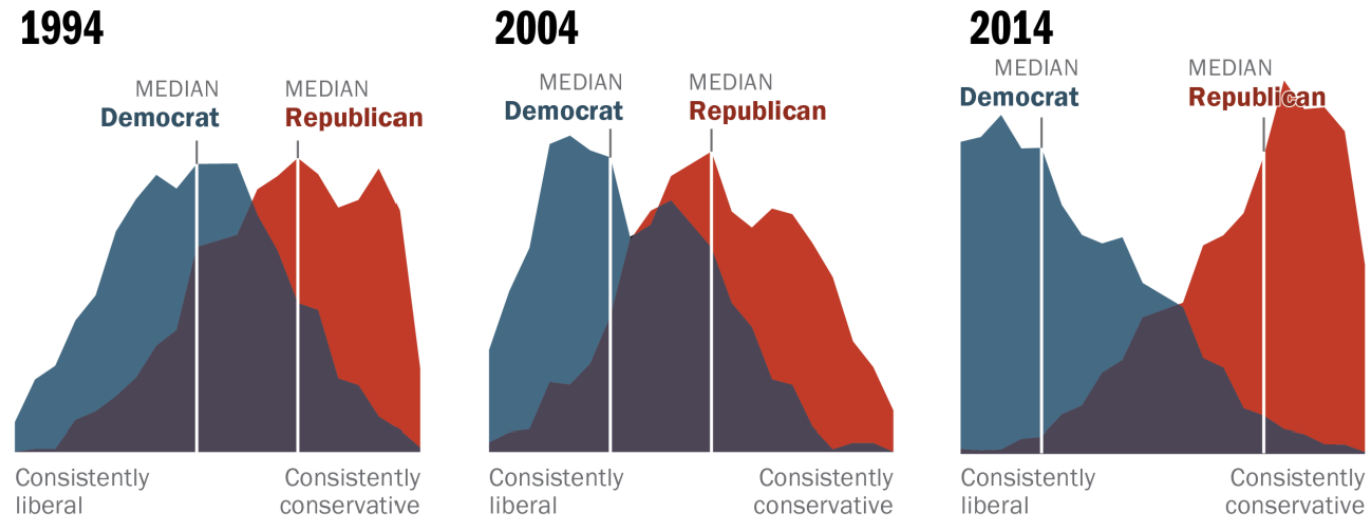
Source: Pew Research Center (2014).



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

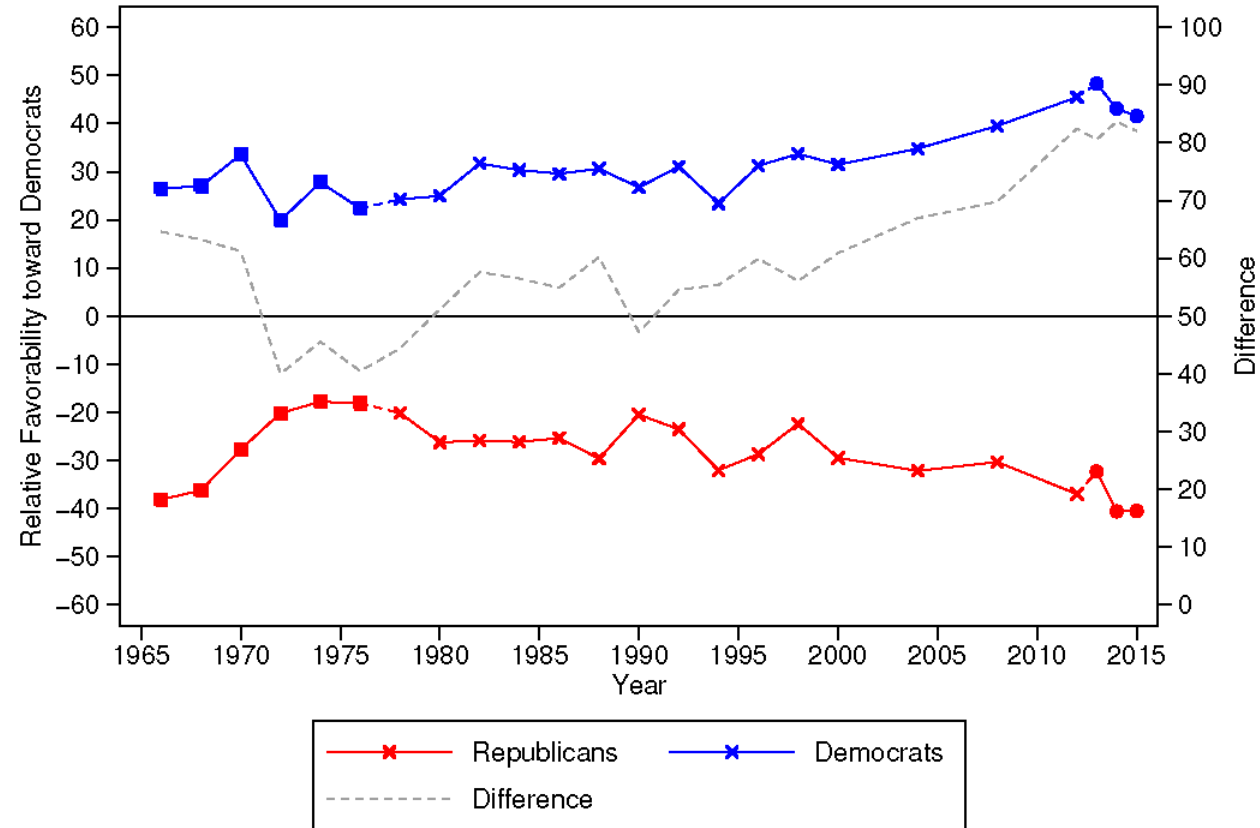
Source: Pew Research Center (2014).

Among the politically engaged

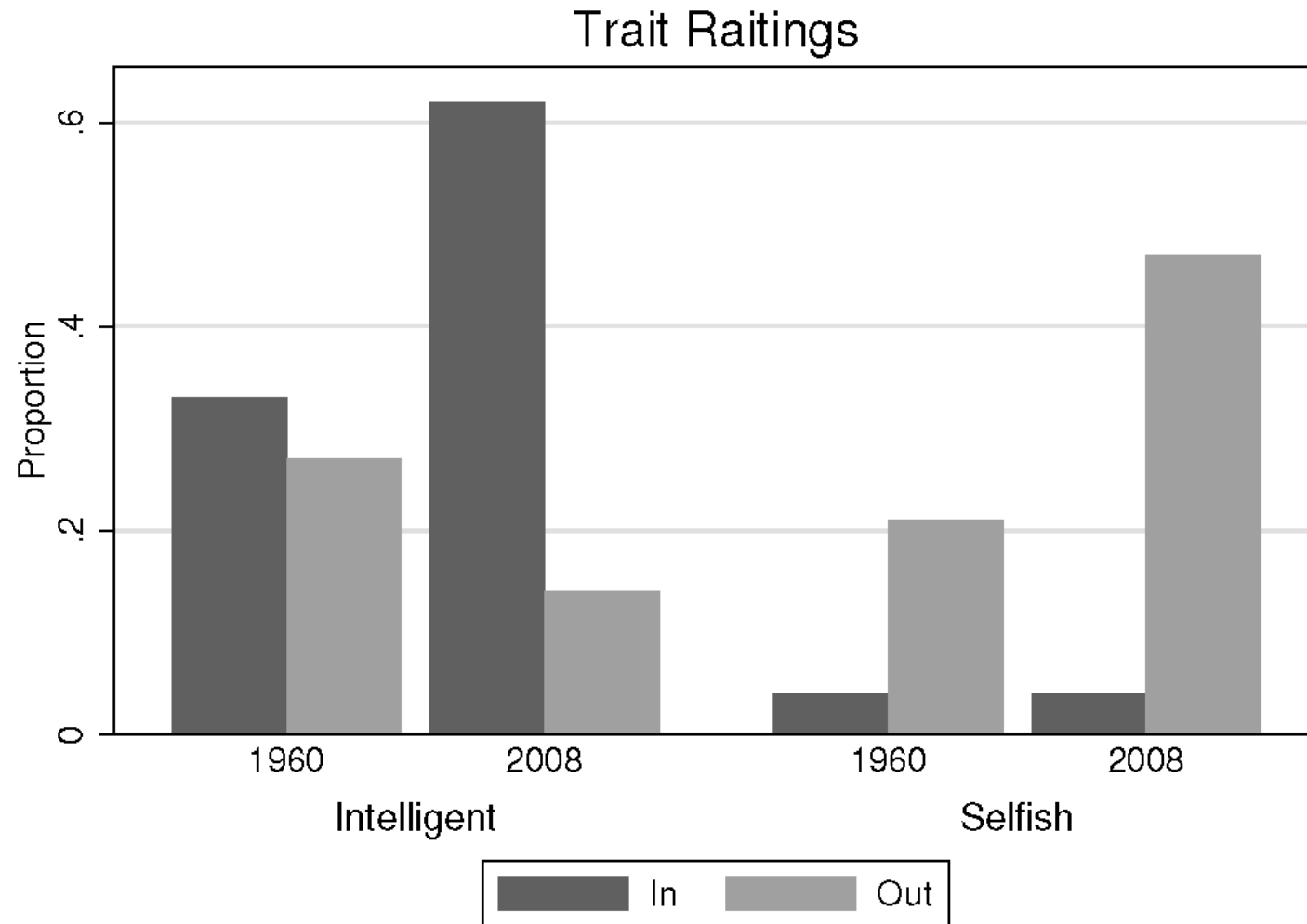


Source: Pew Research Center (2014).

Polarization: Favorability toward Parties

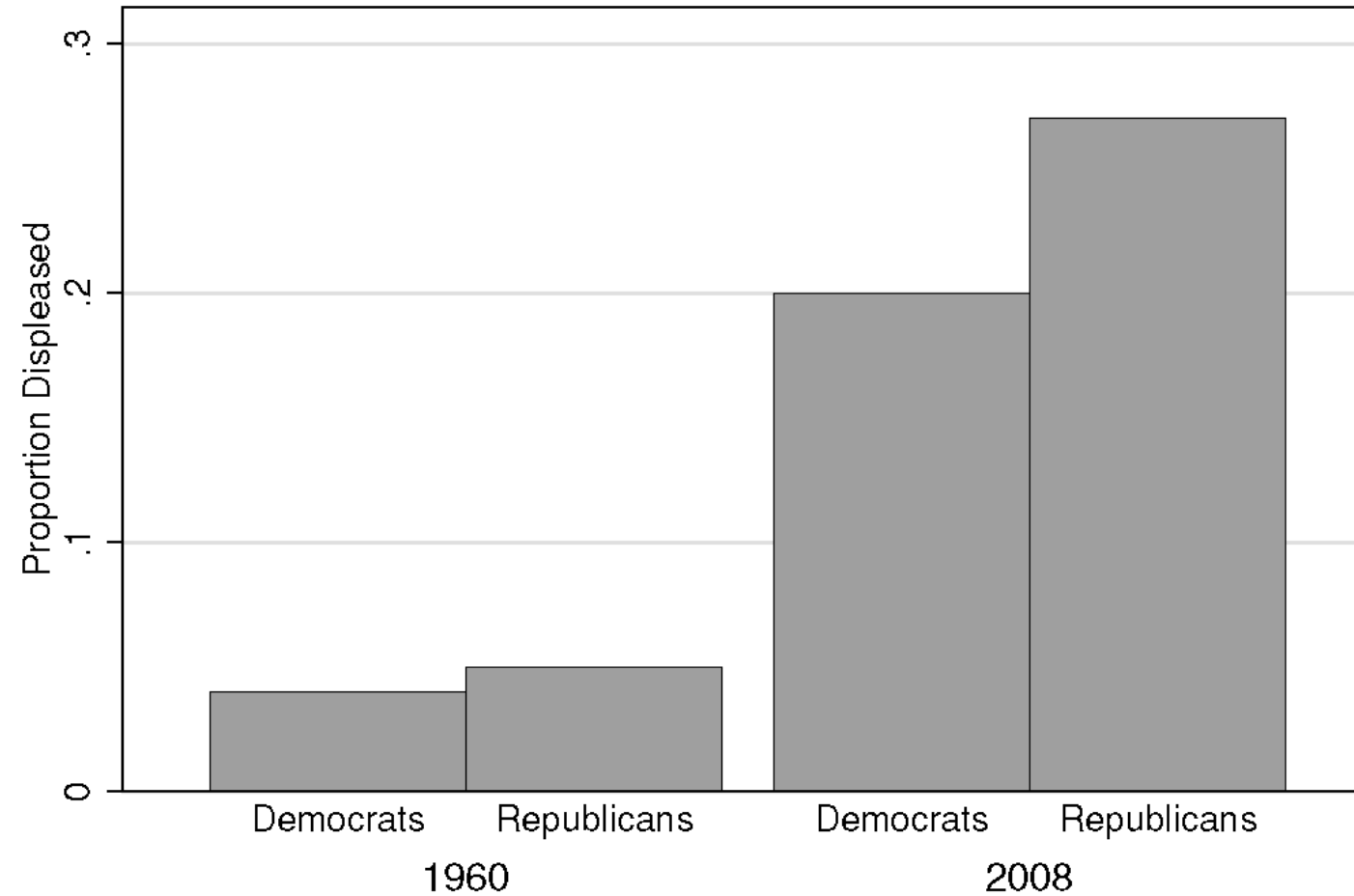


Notes: Using data from the American National Election Study, the red line shows the average favorability of Republicans towards Democrats minus the average favorability of Republicans towards Republicans on a scale from 0-100. The blue line shows an analogous time series for Democrats. The grey line plots the difference between the blue and red lines over time. The National Election Study changed the phrasing of their question over time. The square points represent the original phrasing, the x points represent the revised version of the question, and the circle points represent a similar question used in monthly political surveys by the Pew Research Center. The different time series are then rescaled so that the average values of the overlapping time periods are equivalent.



Notes: Plot shows the proportion of survey respondents who viewed the members of their own party (In) and their opposing party (Out) as intelligent and selfish. The data for 1960 comes from Almond and Verba (1960), while the data for 2008 comes from YouGov (2008).

Inter-Party Marriage



Notes: Plot shows the proportion of Republican (Democrat) survey respondents who would be displeased if their child married a Democrat (Republican). The data for 1960 comes from Almond and Verba (1960), while the data for 2008 comes from YouGov (2008).

Potential explanations: Overview

- Let's discuss together the “Top 14 Causes of Political Polarization” (David Blankenhorn, *The American Interest*)

<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/05/16/the-top-14-causes-of-political-polarization/>

- Two competing theses:
 1. **Demand** → Alan Abramowitz (2010), “The Disappearing Center”
 2. **Supply** → Morris Fiorina et al. (2011), “Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America,” 3rd edition

Where's the median voter gone?

- Theoretical extensions of the median voter framework can produce divergence in party platforms
 1. **Low turnout** due to alienation & abstention due to indifference. No convergence even with unimodal distributions of voters under some conditions (Riker & Ordeshook 1973). Empirically puzzling
 2. **Policy-oriented candidates.** Not enough to produce convergence, voter preferences must be uncertain (Calvert 1985). Or lack of commitment (Alesina 1988). Candidate preferences and party recruitment

Where's the median voter gone? (cont'd)

- 3. Citizen preferences.** But only in models that can produce platform divergence. What citizens: Population, voter, or party activists?
- 4. Incumbency or valence advantage.** The larger the advantage, the larger divergence (Londregan & Romer 1993). More extreme positions by challengers (Groseclose 1999)
- 5. Primary elections.** Either two-stage process or anticipation of potential challenge

Demand factors

- Inequality (McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal 2006)
- Identity politics (Lilla 2017)
 - ✓ Special case of new cleavages
- The “Big Sort” (Bishop 2008)
- Media environment
 - ✓ Sunstein (2017) vs Boxell et al. (2017)

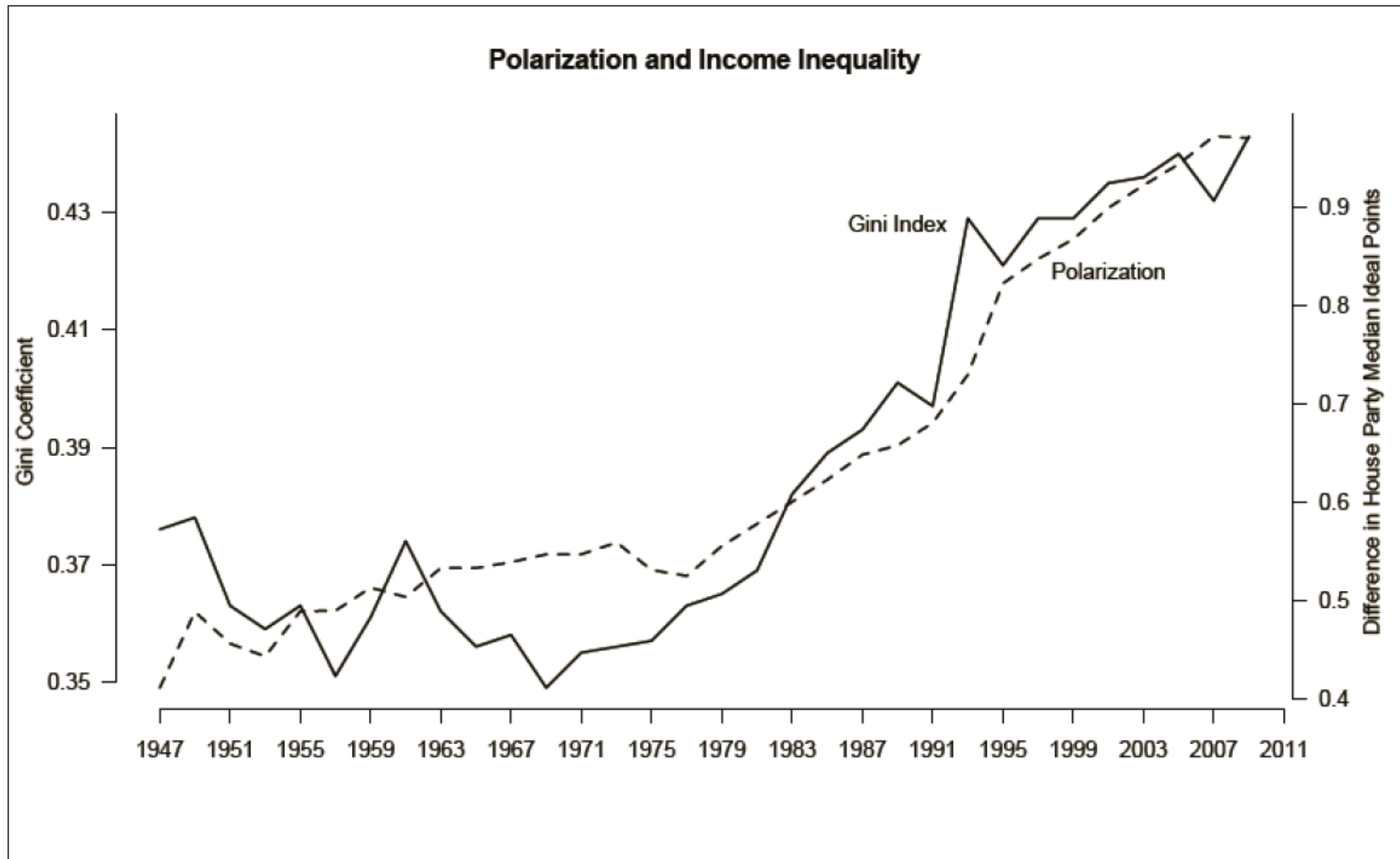


Figure 2.8: *Polarization and Income Inequality*. The y-axis show the difference in median positions for the two parties and the Gini coefficient in the United States. The Gini coefficient is a measure of income inequality that ranges between 0 (perfect income equality) and 1 (one person controls 100% of the nation's income).

Supply factors

- Gerrymandering ([visual example](#))
 - 47% safe districts in 1960s, 62% in 2000s ([more here](#))
- Incumbency advantage
- Party organization decline
- Primary elections ([recent example](#))
 - ✓ Despite general-election penalty, see Hall (2015)
- Campaign finance
- Media environment (over-reaction)

Path dependence?

Feedback effects may lead to cumulative polarization:
Reinforcing impact of *supply* on *demand*

- Polarizing impact of disillusionment on both political views and participation ([psychological channel](#))
- From “extreme” to “mainstream” after political victory ([social norms channel](#))

Potential remedies (if any)

1. Get-out-the-vote
2. Improve voter information
3. Re-districting
4. Primary reform
5. Campaign finance reform
6. Electoral and/or legislative reform: But in what direction? Proportional vs majoritarian approach

Question: Demand or supply?

More discussion: Persily (2015)

Two opposing views (also here)

1. *“The theory of responsible party government is based on a strongly majoritarian view of democracy. This theory assumes that after an election is over, the winning party will carry out the will of the majority by implementing the policies on which it campaigned. However, many features of the American political system were deliberately designed to thwart the will of the majority. Divided party control of the legislative and executive branches, the presidential veto, the bicameral structure of the legislative branch, the over-representation of less populous states in the Senate, and the cloture rule in the Senate all have important anti-majoritarian consequences”* (Abramowitz 2010)
2. *“The Hijacking of American Democracy”*: *“When it comes to ways to spend a Saturday afternoon, attending a caucus comes in well below almost anything other than a dentist appointment.”* In order to stop this hijacking, we need: a) primary reform, b) competitive re-districting, and c) increasing participation (Fiorina et al. 2011)

References

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- Autor et al. (2017), [*Importing Political Polarization? The Electoral Consequences of Rising Trade Exposure*](#)
- Bonica (2010), [*Ideologically Aligned and Ideologically Divided Industries*](#)
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- Rehm (2010), [*Risk Inequality and the Polarized American Electorate*](#)
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