

A DIVIDED AMERICA? EXAMINING THE POLARIZATION OF THE ELECTORATE FROM 1974 TO 2004

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Abstract

To what extent are Americans divided in terms of their liberal and conservative preferences? Have their opinions become more polarized over time? Much of the recent literature on voter polarization suggests that there are far fewer moderate voters in the United States today compared to in the recent past, and that the country is in the midst of a massive “culture war” between liberals and conservatives. By examining public opinion polls taken from the 1970s until today, this analysis finds that in contrast to the suggestions that these authors make in regards to voter polarization, American voters have not steadily become less moderate since the 1970s. Rather, the level of polarization in America has tended to rise and fall over time depending on the political situation in the country.

INTRODUCTION

According to Greenberg, “America is divided. We live in a moment in history when the two big political parties have fought to a draw, reflecting the intense partisanship of our times” (2005: 2). This competition has led to the development of what Greenberg calls “the Two Americas—divided politically, and, increasingly, culturally, with distinct and counterpoised view about government, values, the family, and the best way of life” (2005: 5). However, many in the field of American politics believe that this perceived polarization is simply a myth. Robinson and Ellis believe that “pundits and political scientists have equated ‘evenly divided’ with ‘polarized,’” thus mistakenly attributing close electoral races to a deeply divided nation (2006: 22). Is it true that Americans are no longer moderate, or is the theory of voter polarization simply over-exaggerated? Have Americans become less moderate over time? If so, what is causing this increasing polarization of the electorate? These are the issues that will be addressed in this paper and empirically tested by examining the levels of polarization in various public opinion questions.

Before determining whether or not the electorate has become more polarized, it is first necessary to define the concept of “polarization.” In their study of opinion polarization, DiMaggio et al. (1996) define polarization as the extent of disagreement between two groups of people. This description is functional for this study, in which the measures of disagreement are recorded and examined over time. In terms of public opinion data, polarization can also be defined as the extremity of and distance between responses, another useful guideline for this study. The greater extent to which these

opinions move toward separate extremities and away from the middle position, the more polarized the group on the particular item.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to begin to understand the polarization of the electorate, it is important to first recognize that polarization is seen in terms of both partisan leanings and cultural attributes. Ceaser and Busch (2005) have undertaken a thorough study of how the polarization of the electorate has changed over the past several decades, both in terms of partisanship and culture. They point out that oftentimes, political scientists and sociologists alike think that this divide is primarily in terms of culture. More specifically, because two groups of citizens have voted differently in recent presidential elections, many mistakenly believe that these citizens must be deeply divided culturally as well as by their partisan leanings. According to the authors, “One ill effect of the [red state, blue state] color scheme is that it can contribute to this kind of dichotomous thinking” (Ceaser and Busch 2005: 18). What matters most, according to Ceaser and Busch, is the relative degree of support for Republicans or Democrats.

Klinkner (2004) suggests that there is little evidence showing that the United States is segregated along political lines. He has determined that although the cultural divide that has appeared after the 2000 election has become “accepted wisdom” about contemporary politics, political diversity and party competition still flourish in most of the country (Klinkner 2004: 1). By portraying each state as either red or blue, the initial map that showed the 2000 election results by state ignored the differing levels of support for each candidate, thus leading some to believe that “Americans had sorted themselves into isolated partisan islands” (Klinkner 2004: 2). By breaking the results down into

counties, Klinkner attempts to show that there is great diversity within each state. Furthermore, he shows that the number of counties that went to Bush or Gore in a landslide vote (60% or more for either candidate) is actually average relative to previous presidential elections.

Contrary to Klinkner's article, Bishop and Cushing (2004) report that because the presidential outcome has become so predictable in recent election cycles, there must be some degree of polarization that did not exist previously. In response to Klinkner's data at the county level, Bishop and Cushing criticize Klinkner methodology for including third-party candidates, thus diluting the assertion that the number of county-level landslides was relatively large in 2000. Bishop and Cushing look at a few case studies in California in an attempt to show that America is becoming more polarized. For instance, in San Francisco County, the difference in Republican and Democratic votes in 1980 was just under 50,000; by 2000 that difference jumped to over 200,000. Bishop and Cushing do not suggest reasons for this increase in county landslides, but they do expect this polarization to continue, and possibly become more evident, in upcoming presidential elections.

Rather than using county voting data, Fiorina (2006) uses public opinion polls to show that polarization in the electorate is much smaller than many political pundits think. He finds that voters from states that elected Bush show little difference from Kerry states in terms of their opinions on most issues. Especially in terms of gay marriage and abortion, Fiorina has found that Americans are actually less polarized on such issues than they have been in previous election cycles. The reason for this discrepancy between what many political scientists think and how Americans really feel is that most Americans are

moderate on issues rather than deeply split into two distinct camps. According to Fiorina, “the electorate is *closely* divided...but not *deeply* divided,” meaning that extremely close elections do not represent an extremely polarized electorate (2006: 14). In addition to the confusion between a closely divided and deeply divided nation, other factors that contribute to the myth of polarization are the media, a tendency to confuse peoples’ positions with their choices, and mistaking political activists’ positions with those of regular voters.

Fiorina is not without his critics. Some point out that Fiorina’s biggest mistake is using data collected before September 11, 2001 (Klein, 2004). Because Americans have paid more attention to certain issues such as Iraq and the economy in 2004, Fiorina’s data from 2000 cannot be used to explain voter behavior in the 2004 election. According to Andrew Kohut of the Pew Research Center, “In 2000, average voters were having a hard time telling the difference between the presidential candidates on most issues. That’s not the case this year [2004]... The partisan differences between the political activists are the greatest I’ve seen” (Klein 2004: 27). Contrary to Fiorina’s belief that political activists are unrepresentative of the larger population, Kohut has found in surveys taken in 2004 that swing voters are actually influenced by passionate political activists.

Once it has become established whether or not the country has become more polarized, it is necessary to identify factors that have contributed to this polarization. Some scholars blame the media for making America more polarized, or at least making it appear more divided. Schudson (2002) argues that the media has increasingly become more like a political party than simply a news outlet, developing sophisticated strategies to push certain issues or ideas on the general public. But does the media’s shaping of

public opinion add to the polarization of the electorate? Hunter (1991) believes that it does. He contends that the polarization is “intensified and institutionalized through the very media by which that discussion takes place” by defining the environment of the dialogue and predetermining the substance of what is communicated (Hunter 1991: 170).

Another explanation for an increase in polarization is the divisiveness that resulted from the Reagan administration. Stone, Rapoport, and Abromowitz (1990) argue that by sticking so closely to his party’s conservative wing, Reagan polarized the parties in Congress and thus electoral politics at the national level for years to come. In fact, Reagan even used his office to influence public opinion, resulting in polarization over abortion and defense spending in particular. Page and Shapiro claim that “on an issue he cares about, a president can hammer away with repeated speeches and statements and can expect to achieve a five or ten percentage point change in public opinion over the course of several months” (1992: 370). Reagan’s right-wing agenda also led liberal activists to “rally their base by agreeing that Reagan was a product of an extremist fundamentalist movement” (Hough 2006: 181). In this way, Reagan led the conservative voters to attach with the more conservative positions while driving away the more liberal voters, which according to these authors, has led to the polarization of the electorate.

A third factor that may add to the polarization of the electorate is the polarization within Congress. There is much debate over whether Congress has a polarizing effect on the electorate or if a more divided electorate elects ideological candidates. Jacobson (2000) shows in his study of party polarization that members of Congress affect the voters rather than the other way around. “Voters sort themselves out politically by responding to the alternatives represented by the two parties” according to Jacobson

(2000: 25). Fleisher and Bond (2001) also show that it is the nature of current elections that presents this effect on the voters. They believe that the polarization that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s among voters “is not a function of a stronger role for political parties but is instead the consequence of the type of candidates nominated in an age of candidate-centered politics” (Fleisher and Bond 2001: 58). Considering the multitude of literature on the polarization of the electorate, it is surprising that such inconsistency exists among these works. This study will attempt to settle the debate on this topic.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data Collection

The public opinion data gathered to test this theory came from both the General Social Surveys (GSS) and the American National Election Studies (NES). The GSS, produced by the National Opinion Research Center, is helpful for time-trend studies such as this one because it asks a wide variety of questions to its respondents, with similar or identical question wording each year. The data file used here is a cumulative file of GSS surveys taken from 1972-2004. Although the GSS addresses topics anywhere from ethnicity of respondents to information literacy, this study utilizes the survey data primarily to determine opinions, over time, on a range of public policy issues.

Similar to the GSS dataset is the NES survey, established at the University of Michigan’s Center for Political Studies. This collection focuses more on specific questions dealing with political values, making it a helpful supplement to the GSS survey data. The NES also asks many of the same questions over a long period of time. The cumulative data file obtained for the years 1972-2004 has been previously recoded by the University of Michigan to ensure consistency over the time span.

The process of deciding which research questions to use from these public opinion polls has important implications for answering the research question presented here. If one were to test the polarization of the electorate by choosing to include only “hot-button” issues, such as abortion, he or she may find different results than if one had chosen to use more mundane, everyday issues such as social security spending. In order to ensure that my research findings are as general as possible, I have made an effort to utilize a wide-range of issues both controversial and non-controversial while ensuring that each research question was available for almost all years of the study. From the GSS data I have chosen questions regarding political party affiliation and ideology of respondent, preferences on education spending, foreign aid, welfare spending, social security spending, and whether or not the government should equalize wealth of its citizens. The NES items chosen for this study include questions regarding the government’s responsibility to protect the environment, spending to fight crime, abortion, whether the respondent believes the government wastes tax money, the extent to which the respondent believes government should provide health insurance, and defense spending. For a more detailed list of these variables, see Table 1.

In using this dataset I came across three problems. The first of these deals with the limitations of the dataset in the questions asked. Unfortunately not every question from either set was asked consistently through the 1974-2004 time period. For example, the environmental

Table 1
Variables Used from GSS and NES Datasets

<i>Item</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Years</i>
Party ID	Political party affiliation	0 – 6	1974-2004
Ideology	Think of self as liberal or conservative	1 – 7	1974-2004
Education	Amount spent on improving education system	1 – 3	1974-2004
Foreign Aid	Amount spent on aid to foreign countries	1 – 3	1974-2004
Welfare	Amount spent on welfare payments	1 – 3	1974-2004
Equal Wealth	Government should reduce income differences between citizens	1 – 7	1978-2004
Social Security	Amount spent on social security	1 – 3	1984-2004
Environment	Amount spent on environmental protection	1 – 3	1984-2004
Abortion	Abortion be allowed by law	1 – 4	1980-2004
Crime	Amount spent on decreasing crime rates	1 – 3	1984-2004
Government Waste	Government wastes tax money	1 – 3	1976-2004
Government Health Insurance	Government should provide public health insurance	1 – 7	1976-2000
Defense Spending	Government should increase defense spending	1 – 7	1980-2004

protection item was asked beginning in the year 1984 rather than 1974. Two other variables were asked beginning in 1984, leaving out ten years of data. I do not think my results will be distorted by this problem because I found no pattern suggesting that a certain type of question was over- or under-represented in the dataset. The second problem with the data was the existence of the “do not know” responses and missing cases. For the purposes of this study I decided to eliminate the “do not know” responses from the analysis. The third problem, and probably the most debilitating in this part of the research design, was the absence of one year’s data from the GSS. The dates of collection from this survey included the years 1972-1978, 1980, 1981-1991, 1993, 1994 and all even-numbered years after that. For this analysis, using just even-numbered years, the loss of one year’s data has been a problem. Although the NES data does include all even-numbered years 1974-2004, the lack of the GSS data for 1992 greatly

skews the analysis. For this reason I have decided not to include the 1992 responses for the NES items surveyed, creating a slight break between the years 1990 and 1994.

Methods of Data Analysis

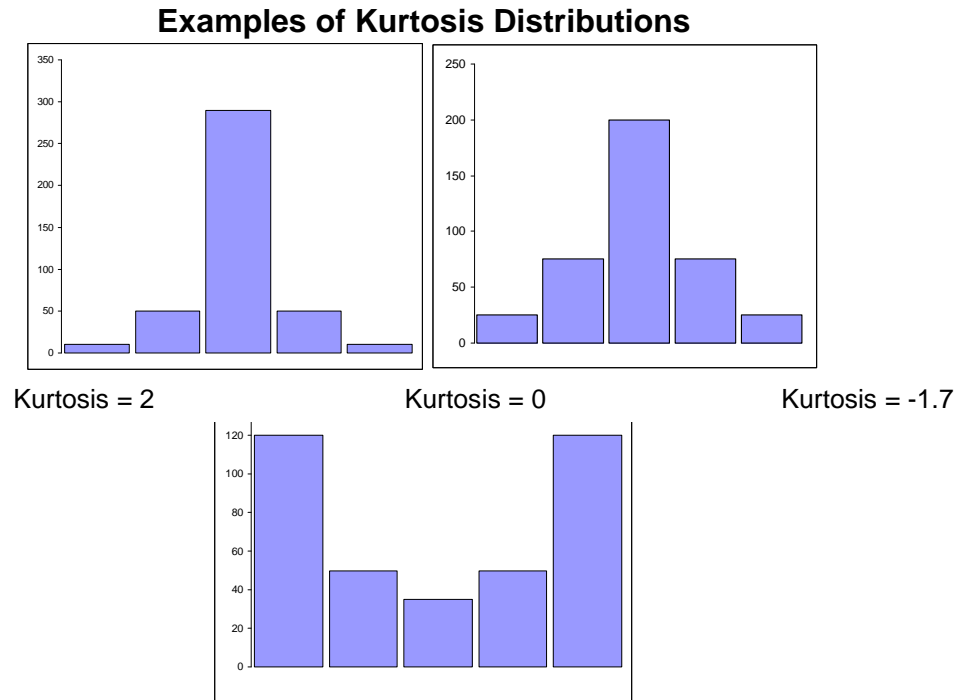
In order to determine first if the electorate has become more polarized, two types of data taken from these surveys will be analyzed: first the respondents' party identifications and ideologies and second their responses on the public opinion questions mentioned above. In order to examine the polarization by party identification and ideology the two GSS survey items were recoded into dummy variables. The party identification variable originally had values scaled from zero to six, zero for "strong Democrat" and six for "strong Republican." Rather than being interested in the number of Republicans and Democrats or liberals and conservatives, for purposes of this study I am more interested in the number of those in the middle of the ideological spectrum. If the number of moderates has gone up in the years studied here, it could be suggested that the electorate has become more polarized. In order to determine if the number of voters identifying as Independent has gone up, a dummy variable was created: values of "Independent," "Independent leaning Republican," and "Independent leaning Democrat" were all given values of one, while "strong" and "not so strong" Democrats and Republican responses were given values of zero. The mean values were then taken for each year, with declining mean values representing polarization.

A similar process was undertaken for ideology. The ideology variable was originally coded on a one to seven scale, one being the most liberal and seven being the most conservative. In order to determine if the number of moderates has increased or decreased since 1974, it was necessary to create a dummy variable to represent a change

in the number of moderate positions. Values of “extremely liberal,” “liberal,” “extremely conservative,” and “conservative” were given values of zero, while values of “moderate,” “slightly liberal,” and “slightly moderate” were given values of one. Similar to the party identification variable, the mean values decrease as the electorate becomes more polarized.

The second test used in this study is the kurtosis test. Kurtosis is the measure of the extent to which data points cluster around a central point, with a normal value of zero.¹ As the data points cluster more toward the center, the distribution’s kurtosis value grows larger; as the points cluster more toward either side, kurtosis becomes smaller. As Figure 1 shows, a larger number of data points in the middle of the distribution results in a higher kurtosis, whereas a higher number of data points grouped toward the outside results in a lower kurtosis value. Kurtosis is an ideal measure of polarization because it measures the extent to which the data points gather towards the extreme or moderate opinions.

¹ The formula for kurtosis (k) is $k = \{[\sum (X - m)^4 \div N] / s^4\} - 3$, where m is the mean, s is the standard deviation, and subtracting “3” ensures that the normal distribution remains “0” (DiMaggio et al., 694).

Figure 1

Analysis

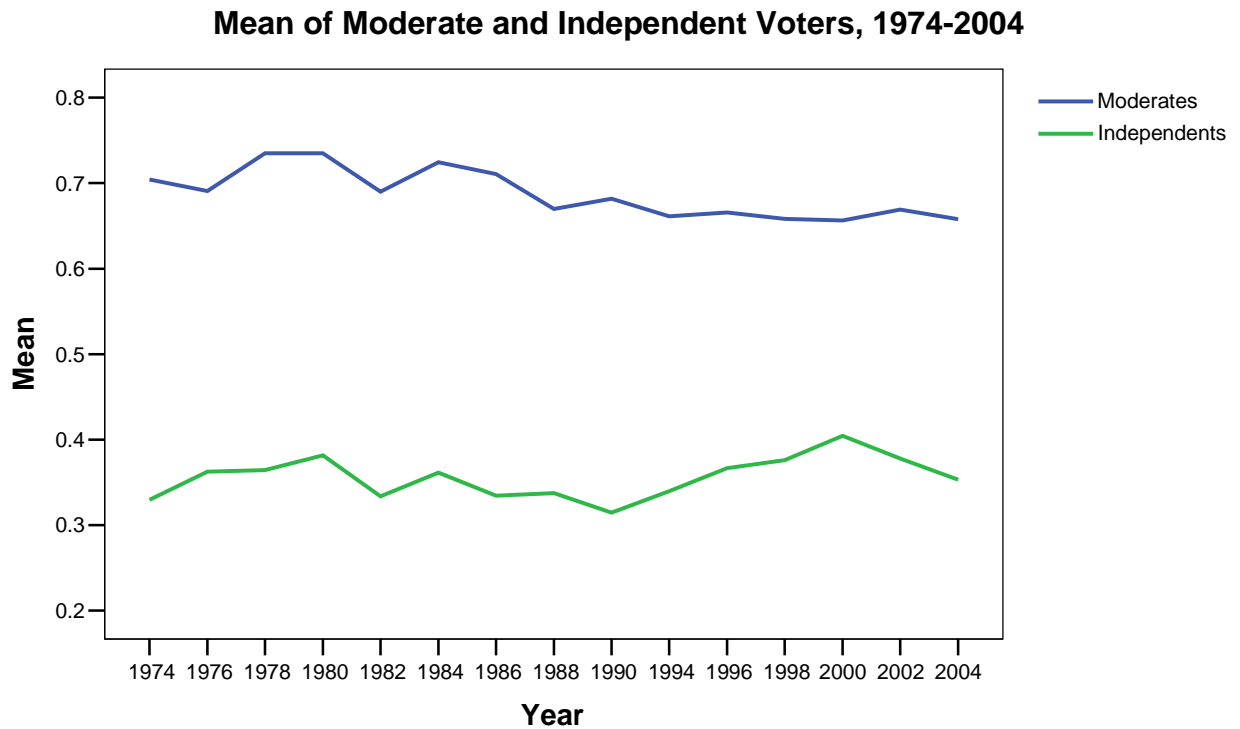
Party Identification and Ideology

The first test used to determine if the electorate has become more polarized was a test of the party identification and ideology of respondents. By taking the mean of the dummy variables for these two variables to separate moderates from non-moderates (recall that a mean value closer to one represents the more moderate position), interesting results have appeared. First of all, voters are more prone to take the middle-of-the-road position ideologically than party-wise. In other words, people would more readily regard themselves as moderate (rather than liberal or conservative) than as Independent (rather than Republican or Democrat), as shown in Figure 2.

Second of all, this test has shown somewhat conflicting results. I originally assumed that a rise in left- or right-of-center ideology and a rise in party identification

would represent an increase in polarization. This phenomenon would be characterized by a decrease in the mean values of the ideology and party identification dummy variables. However, as Figure 2 shows, the number of self-identified moderates decreases, while the number of Independents *increases* over time. These conclusions can be drawn by looking at the net change in mean values from 1974-2004.

Figure 2



In order to get a clearer picture of the trend displayed in Figure 2, it is necessary to understand how moderate these small numbers of Independents are. For the years 1974 through 2004, exactly 65.2% of respondents identified with the Republican or Democratic Party, while only 22% of all respondents would describe themselves as liberal or conservative (see Table 2). Although these numbers appear plausible, it is puzzling that only 25.4% of respondents would identify as both Independents and

moderates. In fact, more moderates would call themselves Republican or Democrat than self-identify as an Independent.

Although an average 65.2% of respondents identified with a party but only 31.4% identified themselves as liberal or conservative, the trend seems to be pushing the percentages of each variable closer together. The results shown in Figure 2 may have been due to the polarization of the parties during this time period (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2001). As party platforms become less diverse in their issue positions, voters may be driven away from them

Table 2

Party ID - Ideology Crosstabulation

			Ideology		Total
			Lib or Cons	Moderate	
Party ID	R or D	Count	8172	16086	24258
		% of Total	22.0%	43.2%	65.2%
	Independent	Count	3499	9440	12939
		% of Total	9.4%	25.4%	34.8%
Total	Count		11671	25526	37197
	% of Total		31.4%	68.6%	100.0%

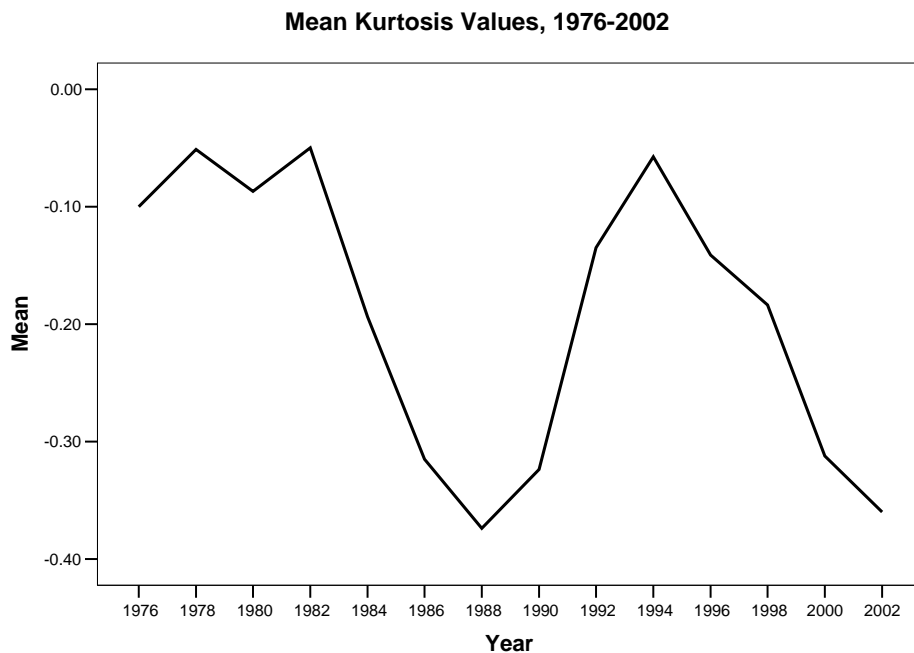
while simultaneously feeling more prone to identify with a particular ideology on a few issues of importance to them. However, by simply looking at the crosstabulation in Table 2, it seems flawed that the number of those truly in the middle (identifying as both moderate and Independent) is only 25.4%. Evidently this test is inconclusive, so it is necessary to turn to the results of the kurtosis test of specific issues in order to clarify.

Kurtosis Values

By taking the kurtosis values (k) of each separate question utilized then finding the mean value for each year, I have found a net decrease, representing a definite rise in polarization (see Figure 4). In 1976, the k value was $-.10$, while in 2002 it dropped nearly $.30$ points to $-.36$. The overall kurtosis values of all years for this study can be characterized as low, given that they all fall below the normal value of zero.²

A surprising result of this test has not been the net decrease of the kurtosis values from 1974-2004, but the fluctuations within those years. From 1976 to 1982, the country remained at a fairly steady level of polarization (k values ranging only from $-.10$ to $-.05$), with the overall levels remaining relatively low. However, in the years 1982 to 1988, the electorate saw a steep increase in polarization. This change is represented by the drop in kurtosis values from $-.05$ in

Figure 3



1982 to a low $-.37$ in 1988. To compare this period to the previous six years, 1976 to 1982 saw an average yearly change of $.01$, while 1982 to 1988 shows an average change

² To see an illustration of a kurtosis value of zero, see Figure 1.

of $-.07$ per year, a fairly drastic difference. The years from 1988 to 1994 saw another sharp change in polarization, but this time the polarization took an abrupt decrease rather than increase.³ The k values in this time period ranged from $-.37$ in 1988 to $-.06$ in 1994, nearly back to the same level as in 1982. Finally, 1994 to 2004 shows a fairly steady increase in polarization, with kurtosis values ranging from $-.06$ in 1994 back down to $-.36$ in 2002.

Possible Explanations for Findings

As Figure 3 shows, kurtosis values representing the level of polarization have not remained constant throughout this time period, nor have they taken a steady, gradual downward path. Instead, the kurtosis values stay relatively constant for a short period of time then take aggressive downward and upward jumps. So, rather than trying to explain the net increase in polarization from 1972 to 2004, I will in this section try to determine the causes of the periodic swings in the polarization of voters. I will break this analysis into three separate periods: the sharp increase in polarization seen in 1982 to 1988, the steep decrease from 1988 to 1994, and the relatively gradual decrease from 1994 to 2002.

The first increase in polarization generally correlates to the term of President Ronald Reagan. Despite the fact that there was a slight decrease in polarization during his first two years as President, there is reason to believe that the Reagan presidency may have had an impact on this steep increase in polarization from 1982 to 1988. According to David Von Drehle, Ronald Reagan “framed his presidency in ideological terms,” forcing religious conservatives away from the Democratic Party and while “making it uncomfortable” for liberal voters to remain with the Republican Party (2004: 16). By

³ Recall that the 1992 values are unavailable, possibly distorting these results.

looking back to the mean values of ideology and partisanship in the previous section (Figure 2), it can also be seen that both ideology and party identification increased during Reagan's two terms as president, consistent with Von Drehle's argument that Reagan helped voters sort themselves into separate factions.⁴

The steep decrease in polarization from 1988 to 1994 correlates to the drastic change in foreign policy occurring in those years. According to a recent Pew Research Center study, foreign policy has a larger effect on dividing the electorate than once thought (Kohut, 2005). So, judging from this conclusion, it seems fair to suggest that because there were relatively few controversial foreign policy initiatives occurring immediately after Cold War, the country was not extremely polarized because they had no large foreign policy questions to become divided over. Compared to the post-September 11th foreign policy era occurring today, there was very little controversy surrounding foreign policy in the early 1990s. At this time, the Cold War was officially over, the Gulf War of 1990 ended quickly and successfully, and the United States was a nation fixed on using its foreign policy strength as a "force for good," demonstrating not a lack of foreign policy focus but rather a lack of polarization on these issues (Bush, 1989). If Kohut's theory is accurate, the data in this study would back up the contention that America was less polarized from 1988 to 1994 due to the lack of controversy in foreign affairs. From 1988 to 1994, the kurtosis values of the foreign aid variable rose .6 points from 1.22 to 1.83, showing less polarization in these years.⁵ So, on the whole, the

⁴ Recall that a decrease in mean values indicates an increase in far-left/far-right party identification and ideology.

⁵ Notice how this variable also shows a definite lack of polarization in its positive kurtosis values. After 1994, the values began to fall, dropping below zero in 2000.

electorate was not divided on foreign policy issues from 1988 to 1994 which may correlate to the lack of polarization at this time.

The final increase in the level of polarization, occurring from 1994 to 2002, is in my belief a combination of two different factors: the growing polarization of Congress and the Bush presidency. There is little doubt that Congress has become more polarized in recent years, especially since the 1994 midterm elections (Jacobson, 2000; Aldrich and Rohde, 2000). But does this trend have any effect on the polarization of voters? Jacobson believes that it does, given his theory that “voters sort themselves out politically by responding to the alternatives represented by the two parties” (Jacobson 2000: 25). One example of this occurrence was the abortion issue: the controversy first surfaced in Congress and then spread to the electorate (Adams, 1997). Congress’s ideological divergence facilitated the move for the electorate to divide ideologically from 1994 until now by making it easier for each voter to recognize his or her “appropriate ideological home” (Jacobson 2000: 26). Jacobson’s theory is consistent with the growing polarization in this period.

The more gradual increase in polarization from 2000 to 2002 may have something to do with both the 2000 presidential election and the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks. If one were to break down these two years it would probably show that the electorate was deeply divided immediately after the 2000 election, somewhat less divided after the 2001 attacks, and then reverted back to their original factions again with the coming of the war in Iraq (Jacobson, 2003). Jacobson claims that Bush’s first two years in office have “left the electorate, like the Congress, as divided and polarized as when he entered the White House,” which according to the results of this study is

accurate (2003: 728). These events helped to slightly decelerate the growing polarization in the years between 2000 and 2004, with mean kurtosis values dropping only .05 points from 2000 to 2004 compared to a .13 drop from 1998 to 2000. Despite this continuing increase in polarization after 2001, it is still too early to determine the lasting effects that the Iraq war and the remainder of the Bush presidency will have on the polarization of the electorate.

CONCLUSION

Although the measure of party identification and ideology over the time period studied here has shown questionable results, the results of the kurtosis comparisons appear to be conclusive. The time period from 1974 to 2004 has shown a variation in polarization rather than a consistent increase or decrease. The pattern of polarization in the electorate has been relatively steady in the years from 1976-1982, took a steep increase in the years from 1982-1988, decreased again from 1988-1994, and has steadily increased from 1994 until now. Research has shown that these variations can be explained by the connections between electorate polarization and the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the period of an agreeable foreign policy, the polarization of Congress, and the events of Bush presidency. Overall, as this paper has shown, the political pundits that focus on the increasing polarization are correct to a certain extent. The electorate has become more polarized in the last 10 or 12 years, but America is hardly in the midst of a “culture war...that will continue to have reverberations not only within public policy but within the lives of ordinary Americans everywhere” as Hunter has described (1991: xii).

Although these results have shown a continuous increase in polarization over the past ten years, there is reason to believe that this trend may have already begun to switch

course. In the 2006 midterm elections, many highly-conservative Republicans were defeated, while many moderate Democratic candidates were elected. Although this may primarily be an indication of voter's dissatisfaction with the party in government, I believe that it at least partly has to do with a growing number of moderate voters. President Bush in his November 8th new conference also attributed the results to a more moderate electorate, making several references to the need for bipartisan cooperation in the coming years (Bush, 2006).

If there really is a shift in the polarization of the electorate after 2006 and the trend does continue, it may have serious implications for the ways candidates run their campaigns. Karl Rove's strategy in 2004 included placing much more emphasis on mobilizing the conservative base to vote in the election rather than trying to win over moderates. This may have been effective because, as Figure 3 shows on page 14, polarization was very high in 2004, meaning that there were probably fewer voters taking moderate positions on issues or voting for the more moderate candidates. It seems that in 2006 the Republicans stuck with this strategy, while also not working with the Democrats in Congress to pass more moderate legislation. This refusal to cooperate may have also caused the defeat of the Republican "party machine" that had developed since 2000 (National Review Online, 2006). So, as shown in the 2006 election, the level polarization in the American voting population has two major implications: how politicians run their campaigns and the way they perform their duties as lawmakers. Judging by the results of this study and the 2006 midterms, officeholders should not rely too much on a seemingly reliable base of voters whom they believe share the same ideologies, because the electorate will more than likely shift in terms of their level of polarization.

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