

INTRODUCTION

Voters are not fools.

—V. O. Key, Jr. *The Responsible Electorate*¹

America is polarized. Our political parties are highly polarized and the American electorate is highly polarized. By highly polarized, I mean there are substantial differences in political perspectives across a single ideological dimension. Liberals versus conservatives. Fundamental political differences slice through broad segments of the American electorate and separate the political parties on a wide range of important issues. The polarization of the American electorate is real and widespread. It is not an artifact manufactured by polarized political parties, manipulative politicians, rabble-rousing talking heads, myopic interest groups, or mischievous gerrymanders. It is not limited to rarified groups of political leaders or zealous activists, or even the politically engaged. Nor is it constrained to only a few contentious, hot-button issues. It is *not* an illusion formed by forced choices in elections or geographic clusterings of the like-minded. Political divisions in American politics are now deep and real.

Despite this reality, the idea persists that America is a moderate nation and that most Americans are moderates. That is a myth. Most

Americans are not moderates. Not even a slim majority of Americans voting in recent elections are moderates. Some are to the left, some to the right, and together they outnumber those in the middle. America is a politically divided nation, it has been so for some time, and has become more so in recent decades.

While the American electorate and its political parties are quite polarized, the extent of polarization should not be exaggerated. Though a majority of voters are *not* moderates, moderates are still a large and important minority. And even among the majority of the electorate who are not moderates, few could properly be called extremists. We are substantially polarized, but we are not a bimodal nation with half of the electorate at the leftist outer edge of the political universe and the other half on the extreme right wing. We are highly polarized between liberals and conservatives, not between totalitarians and anarchists. The polarization of American politics pales in comparison to the polarization of other nations with more combative political cultures or even our own in more combustible times such as the decades leading up to the Civil War. As polarized as we are, we could be more so. Moreover, despite the attention now paid to polarization and the evidence of its increase, the ideological composition of the American electorate has not changed radically in recent decades.

As rough as our political debates can be, and they can get quite vicious, happily we are not on the precipice of another civil war. Americans and both major political parties share a great deal of common ground. There are still core American values.² We all want peace and prosperity, a secure nation, equal opportunities and justice, an efficient government with fair elections, a successful educational system, a clean environment and ample access to energy, a well-maintained and efficient transportation system, reliable and technologically advanced communication networks, a compassionate system of safety nets for those who cannot fend for themselves, safe streets and suitable housing, wholesome food, plenty of safe and rewarding jobs, and so on. More abstractly, there still seems to be a consensus about many basic principles, from individualism to majority rule and minority rights, what Austin Ranney and Willmoore Kendall long ago referred to as the “American Creed.”³

However, though these fundamental goals are shared, we should not be deluded into thinking that all is peaceful politically and that

our differences are only superficial or slight. They are not. There are sharp and deep differences between large segments of the electorate and between the political parties about what these common goals mean in practice, how they might best be achieved, and what role government should play in achieving them. There are also a number of hot issues on which goals are not held in common (the abortion issue, for example). These further divide large segments of the electorate and the political parties.

So how is it that the American electorate is now polarized, if there is a large contingent of moderates and if the ideological composition of the electorate has not changed dramatically in recent times? First, like most things, polarization is a matter of degree. It is not an all-or-nothing matter. American voters are highly polarized, but not completely polarized. The nation can be quite polarized while still having a large number of centrists. By the same token, politics can also be intensely divided while having a good deal of common ground. Red Sox and Yankees fans may both like hot dogs, beer, and infield seats for the ball game, but their rooting for opposite teams overshadows whatever many other preferences they might otherwise have in common. So too with liberals and conservatives. They are all Americans, but that does not mean they are not also at each others' throats on the most important political issues of the day.

Second, though there has not been an enormous shift in public opinion in recent decades, the electorate has become more ideological, and a modest shift of this sort can have major political repercussions. A five- or ten-percentage-point shift in ideological preferences may seem like "small potatoes," but a nation that is 40% moderate and 60% ideological (liberal or conservative) operates quite differently politically from one that is a 50-50 split. In the 1930s, the normal vote in presidential elections changed by only about 10 or 11 percentage points and that ushered in the huge change of the New Deal that restructured public policy for generations. Changes in the balance of the relatively ideological versus the relatively non-ideological in the electorate have not been quite this large, but they have been significant.

Finally, the electorate is highly polarized without having changed a great deal in recent times because it has been quite polarized for a long time. The electorate was not very polarized in the 1950s and early 1960s, but became much more so in the late 1960s and 1970s. For

historical reasons dating back to the period of the Reconstruction after the Civil War and even before that, differences in the electorate were not well reflected by the political parties. The heterogeneous compositions of the parties, with many liberals in the Republican Party and many conservatives in the Democratic Party, essentially obscured and muted the extent of political differences in the electorate. This began to change in the 1960s with a prolonged or staggered partisan realignment, a process that dragged on into the 1990s because of the historical absence of a viable Republican Party in the formerly solid Democratic South and the power of incumbency. As the realignment took shape, first in presidential voting in the late 1960s, then in party identification shifts in the 1980s, and in congressional voting in the 1990s, the realigned parties themselves became more polarized (or, in Morris Fiorina's terminology, better "sorted"). As a result, they better reflected the polarization of the electorate. Rather than masking and muting that polarization, the polarized parties now reveal and accentuate polarization in the electorate. Polarization in the electorate begot polarization of the parties and polarization of the parties begot more polarization in the electorate.

This, in a nutshell, is the state of polarization in the American politics and how we got there. The chapters that follow develop this narrative, provide the evidence and analysis regarding it, and assess the consequences of polarization for the political system. They also delve more deeply into why the party system is polarized at all when the logic of party competition would seem to propel parties toward the political center in pursuit of the crucial swing voter, the majority-making median voter.

A number of books have been written in recent years about the polarization of American politics. Why another? The short answer is, to get it right, or at least to take my best shot at getting it right, and to tie together the various aspects of polarization into its big picture. Though there have been a number of excellent studies on the subject, a good deal of what has been written about the polarization of the electorate is mistaken in its evaluation of the evidence and in its fundamental conclusions. A more complete answer to the question of why another polarization study is that there is still a great deal to learn about polarization (a subject of chapter 1) and there are a number of

problems with the theories and studies that dominate the debate about the level and change in polarization (a subject of chapter 2). This real and more complete story of polarization, from its theory to its analysis, has not been told before now.

The study is organized into three parts and a concluding chapter (so, four parts if you want to get picky). “Preparing the Foundation” is the first part and consists of the first two chapters. Chapter 1 takes stock of what we know and what we do not know about political polarization. There are some fairly settled questions about polarization. Among these is the fact that the political parties, both in the electorate and at leadership levels, are now highly polarized. This is not disputed, but several other questions (see above) remain wide open. Two of the principal remaining questions concern the extent and change in the polarization of the electorate and another three questions concern party polarization—why the parties have become increasingly polarized, whether one party has grown more extreme than the other, and why the parties are polarized at all.

Chapter 1 also highlights six important analytical concerns to keep in mind in examining polarization. Clear answers are more likely to come from clear questions and these require clear distinctions. It is important to maintain the distinctions between the polarization of the electorate and the polarization of the parties (leaders or party identifiers) and between questions about *change* in polarization as opposed to the *extent or level* of polarization. The question of the existence or level of polarization in the public should be understood as being quite distinct from the question of whether polarization has increased a great deal. The public may be quite polarized without polarization having increased greatly. Finally, answers to questions about either the change or level of polarization require benchmarks, some way of determining whether polarization should be considered high or low.

Chapter 2 offers some historical and intellectual background to the current debate about polarization. Though it is often forgotten, the extent and nature of conflict in American politics is not a new subject. The chapter also presents the several theories of polarization as well as a number of problems that may have impeded the determination of the extent and reasons for polarization. These problems range from the questions posed about polarization to the data used

to examine them. Determining the level of polarization in a nation and how well it matches up with the polarization of leaders and political parties over time is a difficult task. Since polarization is a matter of degree, not an all-or-nothing condition, how do you tell whether the glass is three-quarters full or only one-quarter full?

Chapter 2 also summarizes the six major points of this study. The first point concerns the direct evidence of polarization. Although concerns about various methodological problems with the direct evidence may raise some caution flags about placing absolute confidence in the findings, analysis of both the self-reported ideology data and the issue attitude data yield the same results. While various data problems may provide reasons to hold findings based on them in abeyance, the second major point of the study is that circumstantial evidence about polarization is also available and extremely valuable. While offering an indirect view of polarization, the circumstantial evidence has impeccable credentials. From turnout rates to party identification, the measurement of this evidence has been meticulously vetted. Moreover, in every respect, it corroborates the findings of the direct evidence and goes beyond that evidence to shed light on polarization in the years before the direct evidence (self-reported ideology and issue attitude data) was available. The final four major points concern the extent of polarization in the electorate, the reason why parties are polarized at all (despite the centrist pull of the median voter), the masking of polarization by the pre-realigned ideologically heterogeneous (largely unpolarized) parties, and the revelation of polarization by the post-realigned ideologically homogeneous (highly polarized) parties.

The second part of the book examines the evidence of polarization in the electorate. The empirical investigation into the extent and trends in the public's polarization is based on three different types of data: ideological orientations in chapter 3, issue preferences in chapter 4, and circumstantial behavioral evidence in chapter 5. This three-part examination begins in chapter 3 with an analysis of aggregate responses since the 1970s to survey questions about the ideological perspectives of citizens. The ideology measure is based on direct questions to respondents about their general outlooks on political matters. In many respects it parallels survey questioning about a person's partisanship. The analysis draws together these self-reported ideolog-

ical data from five highly respected sources: the American National Election Studies, the General Social Survey, the CBS and the *New York Times* surveys, Gallup, and the National Exit Polls. There are, of course, many differences among these surveys in how they pose the question and conduct their interviews, but each provides respondents with an option to declare themselves a liberal, a moderate, or a conservative, and some offer more fine-tuned options (extremely conservative, etc.). The analysis of the self-reported ideological measures indicates the American public has become somewhat more ideological and less moderate since the 1970s, but that it was already fairly well polarized in the early 1970s.

With these findings in hand, chapter 3 then evaluates the quality of self-reported ideology data for measuring polarization. A number of questions have been raised about the validity of the measure. Do responses reveal common thrusts in general viewpoints about politics or are they lightly held responses to symbols that mean different things to different people? On the whole, like party identification, there is a great deal of merit in vesting substantial credibility in what respondents tell us about themselves. Without compelling evidence to the contrary, to do otherwise is at least imprudent. After investigating some possible problems with self-reported ideology, including the competing measure of what has been termed “operational ideology,” the self-reported ideology measure looks quite reliable and valid. Though some reasons for skepticism may remain, the ideology evidence of polarization is fairly solid. It indicates that the electorate is, was, and has become more polarized.

Chapter 4 continues the examination of the direct evidence by investigating what the public’s attitudes on policy issues reveal about its polarization. Most prior research on polarization has been based on issue attitudes. This makes a good deal of sense. Voting studies had concluded that most Americans lacked the political sophistication to respond to politics in sophisticated terms. *The American Voter* study had estimated that less than 12% of survey respondents answered questions about the presidential candidates in the 1950s revealing ideological or near-ideological levels of conceptualization.⁴ *The American Voter Revisited* revised these numbers upward for the 2000 electorate, but still found slightly less than 20% with this level of conceptualization.⁵ Considering these limitations, the evidence of

polarization or its absence might be more clearly seen at the less abstract level of practical policy issues (though issue attitude data have many problems of their own). Much of this issue-based research concluded that polarization did not increase over the years, and some push the findings further to claim Americans were not then and are not now highly polarized.

This chapter takes a fresh look at the issue evidence of polarization. Interpreting the evidence is more complicated than it might first seem and requires answering a number of questions. What are we looking for in the issue evidence that would shed light on polarization? Is it enough that attitudes are dispersed on individual issues? Since there are multiple issues in American politics, how might polarization be expressed across a range of issues? How can we evaluate whether issue preferences are widely divided or not? What benchmarks might be established to provide some perspective on the extent of polarization? What is the quality of the issue evidence? There are many problems with issue attitude data, from the temporary nature of issues and the evolution of their meaning in different political contexts to the sensitivity of issue attitude question wordings and their sky-high levels of random measurement error. What can we expect from such flawed data?

At the end of the day, even considering their many problems and the caution that should engender, a careful examination of issue attitude data offers some leverage on the polarization questions. Two exemplar issues from American National Election Study (ANES) surveys are examined in detail: the government guaranteed jobs issue and the government healthcare insurance issue. Despite their many problems, issue attitude data point to the same findings as the self-reported ideology data. Like the ideology evidence, the issue evidence indicates that Americans were quite polarized in the 1970s and have grown more so since then. Moreover, Americans line up on the issues much as they line up ideologically. The polarization of American politics is not a myth. It is very real.

Chapter 5 tackles the public polarization questions from a different angle. As in a criminal investigation, there may not be a perfectly reliable eyewitness (self-reported ideology) or direct physical evidence (issue attitudes), but there may be circumstantial evidence and that is the case when it comes to solving the mystery of polarization. Chap-

ter 5 follows the circumstantial evidence trail by taking advantage of the one major aspect of polarization that is not disputed: that the political parties are now much more polarized than they were. The claim that the public is relatively unpolarized is inconsistent with highly polarized parties in an overwhelmingly partisan electorate. It is also inconsistent with several other well-documented changes in the electorate's attitudes and behavior. We would expect a relatively centrist electorate to have reacted quite differently than a relatively polarized electorate to the increased polarization of the parties. The analysis indicates that across several different criteria (turnout, partisanship, and ticket-splitting) the reaction of the electorate has been what we would expect from a relatively polarized electorate and exactly the opposite of what would be expected from a moderate electorate. In short, together with the ideology evidence of chapter 3 and the issue preference evidence of chapter 4, the circumstantial evidence demonstrates conclusively that the electorate is now quite polarized and has been so for quite some time.

Part 3 turns to questions of the polarization of the political parties. As already noted, there is no doubt that the parties have become much more polarized in recent decades. Chapter 6 attempts to explain why this occurred. Two factors contributed to the increased polarization of the parties: the increased polarization of the public and a realignment of the parties. The partisan realignment was a staggered process that dragged on over several decades. It can be traced back to the 1950s and its roots extend even further back into history. The seeds of the realignment were planted in the aftermath of the Civil War. The party of Lincoln, the Republican Party, was not welcomed across the post-Reconstruction South. In the late nineteenth century and well into the latter half of the twentieth century, there was no viable local Republican Party in the South. The Democratic Party's shift to the left in the 1960s, especially in advocating civil rights legislation, opened up the South to the Republicans, but there were few southern Republicans positioned to take advantage of this. Building a southern Republican Party was a slow process and the parties could not become fully aligned along ideological lines until it was completed in the 1990s. Once the staggered realignment was complete, the parties were more ideologically unified, more polarized, with a clearly conservative Republican Party challenging a clearly

liberal Democratic Party. With a clear orthodoxy within each party, party discipline and each party's base reinforced the already strong ideological inclinations of the parties.

Chapter 7 addresses a twist in the polarization debate. Some claim the polarization of the parties is not the simple result of both parties moving equally to their ideological homes. As they see it, party polarization has been asymmetrical. The Republican Party allegedly has been captured by right-wing zealots while the Democratic Party has remained a reasonable center-left party. The claim of asymmetrical party polarization is half-true and completely understandable. First, there should be no mystery to asymmetry. If the parties are very competitive, as they are, and the public is skewed to the conservative end of the ideological scale, the parties should be similarly skewed. In a center-right nation, the right-wing party should be further to the right than the left-wing party is to the left. If the two parties were equally ideological, the Democrats would be in a permanent minority. That said, the increased polarization of the parties cannot be entirely attributed to the Republican Party becoming more conservative. Before the Republicans began moving to the right, Democrats had moved further to the left. Party polarization followed the staggered nature of the realignment. In the 1970s, congressional Democrats moved significantly to the left, while there was little change in congressional Republicans. The Republican shift to the right came later and was augmented by the growth of conservatism in the public. The polarization of the parties was a two-step dance—maybe three steps: One big step to the left and two smaller steps to the right.

Chapter 8 turns to a very basic question of party polarization: why are the parties polarized at all? Perhaps no political theorem is as highly regarded as the median voter theorem first advanced by Harold Hotelling and developed in Anthony Downs's classic treatise on *An Economic Theory of Democracy*.⁶ As popularly interpreted and applied to two-party competitive politics, the pivotal electoral position of the median voter should compel the parties and their candidates to converge on the decisive swing voter who stands at the median or center of the political spectrum. With full information, rational parties should be entirely unpolarized as the median voter theorem is commonly interpreted. Moving as close to the center as possible is the optimum strategy of parties or candidates seeking to win a two-

way race. By this argument, parties should not be polarized at all, much less as greatly polarized as they have become. And while the extent of current party polarization is historically high, numerous empirical studies over the years suggest that substantial party differences have long been the rule.⁷

What draws the parties away from the political center? The answer is that the more ideological bases of the parties have a good deal of leverage over their parties—not only in the nomination of candidates, but in general elections as well. This reflects the fact that the median voter is not a fixed position, but one that moves with the support each party receives from its base. Every additional vote brought out to the polls from the base moves the critical median voter one vote closer to the party's side of the spectrum. Every non-centrist voter who stays home pushes the position of the median voter one vote further away from the party. The turnout of the base is critical and it depends on non-centrists seeing a substantial difference between the parties and seeing their own party as representing their views. A party that moves too far toward the center risks losing votes from its base as non-centrists see less consequential differences between the parties (indifference) and feel less well represented by their party (alienation). Since these non-centrists are a large, growing, and loyal source of votes for each party, neither party takes its base for granted. Polarized parties are, thus, the result of each party's efforts to assemble a majority, to capture the vote of the median voter.

The book concludes in chapter 9 with a consideration of three basic questions about polarization in the American democratic system. The first is the very basic *Causal Question*: Why is the American electorate polarized at all? What is the basis of our political differences in the electorate? Does democracy breed polarization? As far as we know, there have always been political differences in the electorate and many of these have tended to fall along a single dimension (some degree of polarization). Is there some common explanation of these differences across time and, if so, what is it? Economics, race, views of government, or something else? The second question is the *Consequences Question*: What are the consequences of polarization of the parties and the electorate? Are we better or more poorly represented as a result? Can a government run effectively in a polarized state? How does polarization affect the relationship of citizens to their

government? Does polarization pose a threat to civil and effective democratic government? The final question is the prescriptive *Cure Question*: What, if anything, is to be done about the dysfunctional consequences of polarization? Are there reforms to the government or the democratic political process that would ameliorate the negative consequences of polarization? Is polarization itself a problem or is the real problem in how some people handle their political differences? Other than endlessly complaining about them, how should Americans, the parties, and other mediating institutions (notably the media and educational institutions) deal with polarized politics?

In the end, V. O. Key's sage observation about voters may guide the way to the answers to many of the polarization questions. Voters may be lazy. They may not be very wise. They do not always make the best decisions for themselves or for the nation. They may be less informed and less attentive to politics than we would like. Most are not deep thinkers about politics. That said, Americans have their views about what is right or wrong. As Key reminds us, they are not fools—and neither are their parties. American political parties are highly polarized because Americans are highly polarized.