

**THE DISAPPEARING CENTER:
POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND POLARIZATION IN THE AMERICAN
ELECTORATE**

Alan I. Abramowitz
Department of Political Science
Emory University
polsaa@emory.edu

Prepared for delivery at the Going to Extremes Conference, Rockefeller Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, June 19-21, 2008. Not for quotation or citation without permission of the author.

The ideological sophistication of the American public has been a subject of great interest to students of public opinion and voting behavior since the publication of Philip Converse's seminal study of "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." Based on his analysis of data from the 1956 and 1960 American National Election Studies, Converse concluded that the sort of ideological thinking common among political elites was confined to a small minority of the American public. The vast majority of ordinary voters showed little evidence of using an ideological framework to evaluate political parties or presidential candidates and very limited understanding of basic ideological concepts such as liberalism and conservatism. Perhaps most tellingly, the opinions expressed by citizens on current policy issues were almost completely unrelated to each other. According to Converse, the absence of consistency, or constraint, in the opinions of ordinary voters proved that they were responding to these issues idiosyncratically, rather than based on an underlying liberal or conservative ideology. In fact, on some issues Converse concluded that a majority of respondents did not even have meaningful opinions.¹

Converse's findings concerning the absence of constraint and the prevalence of "nonattitudes" in public opinion on policy issues sparked considerable debate among students of public opinion in the United States. Christopher Achen argued that Converse's results reflected the poor quality of the questions used to measure policy attitudes in the early NES surveys more than a lack of political sophistication on the part of ordinary Americans.² In addition, several studies of public opinion during the late 1960s and early 1970s found that the level of ideological constraint was considerably greater than that observed by Converse.³ However, other scholars concluded that much

of this increase was due to changes in the questions used to measure issue positions in the NES survey.⁴

Polarization as Constraint

The current debate over ideological polarization in the 21st century American public is directly related to the earlier debate over constraint and ideological sophistication in the mid-20th century American public. That is because constraint and polarization are closely related. In fact, one requires the other. For elites as well as the mass public, ideological polarization is defined by consistency across issues—the larger the proportion of leaders or citizens taking consistently liberal or conservative positions on issues, the higher the level of polarization. Ideological polarization in Congress is defined by consistency in voting across issues. Ideological polarization in the public is defined by consistency in responses across survey items. The question that this paper addresses is how constrained and therefore how polarized are the opinions of 21st century American citizens and particularly the opinions of those Americans who care about politics and participate regularly in the electoral process—the group that I refer to as the engaged public.

Whatever the effects of changes in the NES instrument, American politics and the American electorate have changed dramatically since the 1950s in ways that might lead one to expect an increase in the prevalence of ideological thinking in the public, as Converse himself has acknowledged.⁵ One important change has been a very substantial increase in the educational attainment of the electorate. In his original study, Converse found that education was a strong predictor of ideological sophistication: college educated voters displayed much higher levels of ideological sophistication than grade

school or high school educated voters. Between 1956 and 2004, the proportion of NES respondents with only a grade school education fell from 37 percent to 3 percent while the proportion with at least some college education rose from 19 percent to 61 percent. Based on this trend alone, one would expect a much larger proportion of today's voters to be capable of understanding and using ideological concepts.

Another development that might be expected to raise the level of ideological awareness among the public has been the growing intensity of ideological conflict among political elites in the United States. For several decades, Democratic office-holders, candidates, and activists have been moving to the left while Republican office-holders, candidates, and activists have been moving to the right. Conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, who were common in American politics during the 1950s and 1960s, are now extremely rare. At the elite level, ideological differences between the parties are probably greater now than at any time in the past half century.⁶

There is widespread agreement among scholars concerning the growing importance of ideological divisions at the elite level in American politics. There is much less agreement, however, about the significance of these divisions at the mass level. Some studies have found evidence that growing elite polarization has led to an increase in ideological awareness and polarization among the public.⁷ However, other scholars, most notably Morris Fiorina and his collaborators, have argued that when it comes to the political beliefs of the mass public, very little has changed since the 1950s.

In his popular and influential book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina (2006) claims that Converse's portrait of the American electorate "still holds up pretty well." According to Fiorina, the ideological disputes that engage political elites

and activists have little resonance among the American mass public: like their mid-20th century counterparts, ordinary 21st century Americans “are not very well-informed about politics, do not hold many of their views very strongly, and are not ideological”.⁸

One major problem with such sweeping generalizations about the political sophistication of ordinary Americans is that ordinary Americans are far from homogeneous when it comes to political interest, knowledge, and activity.⁹ Some Americans have little or no interest in politics while others care deeply about political issues. Some know very little about government and politics while others know a great deal. And some don't bother to vote while others not only vote but try to influence their friends' and neighbors' votes, contribute money to candidates, and work in political campaigns. This diversity needs to be taken into account in any study of ideological sophistication in the public. As electoral competition in the United States has become increasingly structured by ideology, those citizens who lack a coherent ideological outlook may be increasingly alienated from the two major parties and from the electoral process itself. Thus, Fiorina's description of Americans as uninterested and non-ideological may apply very well to the politically disengaged. However, it may not apply as well to politically engaged citizens, and it is the politically engaged whose opinions are of greatest concern to candidates and elected officials.

This paper will present evidence that the American public has become more consistent and polarized in its policy preferences over the past several decades and that this increase in consistency and polarization has been concentrated among the most politically engaged citizens. Moreover, these engaged citizens are not a small, fringe

group—they constitute a substantial proportion of the public and an even larger proportion of the actual electorate.

This paper will also present evidence that the increase in ideological consistency and polarization among the American public has been accompanied by a growing gap between the policy preferences of Democratic and Republican partisans. On a wide range of issues, rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans, like their elite counterparts, are much more divided today than in the past and the sharpest divisions are found among the engaged partisans who comprise the electoral bases of the two parties.

These two processes—ideological polarization and party sorting—are in fact closely related. As the policy positions of Democratic and Republican leaders have become increasingly consistent and distinct, politically active citizens have responded by bringing their party identification into line with their policy preferences or by bringing their policy preferences into line with their party identification. The result has been growing consistency across issues and growing consistency between issue positions and party identification, a phenomenon that I refer to as partisan-ideological polarization.

The Growth of Polarization in the American Public

A major problem in attempting to compare the consistency of citizens' issue positions over time is that it is difficult to find issue questions that have been asked repeatedly over an extended period. One reason for this is that the major issues dividing the parties have changed over time. In addition, there have been changes in the format and/or wording of many of the issue questions in the NES surveys. For example, the now familiar seven-point issue scales were first introduced during the 1970s and 1980s. However, seven questions dealing with policy issues were included in every NES

presidential election survey between 1984 and 2004. These questions asked about liberal vs. conservative identification, abortion policy, government aid to blacks, defense spending, government vs. personal responsibility for jobs and living standards, government vs. private responsibility for health insurance, and the tradeoff between government services and spending. In order to create a liberal-conservative policy scale, I coded responses to each of these issue questions according to whether a respondent was on the liberal side, the conservative side, or neither side (which included those in the middle and those with no opinion) and combined them into a 15-point liberal-conservative policy scale with scores ranging from -7 for respondents who consistently took the liberal side on all seven issues to +7 for respondents who consistently took the conservative side on all seven issues.

The standard deviation of the scores on the liberal-conservative policy scale can be used to measure the extent of ideological consistency and polarization within a group—the larger the standard deviation, the greater the dispersion of scores around the mean and, therefore, the greater the extent of consistency and polarization. Table 1 displays the standard deviation of scores on the liberal-conservative policy scale in 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 among four groups with varying levels of political engagement: nonvoters, voters, active citizens, and campaigners. Active citizens engaged in at least one activity beyond voting and campaigners engaged in at least two activities beyond voting.

[Table 1 goes here]

The data displayed in Table 1 show that in all six years, campaigners were the most polarized group followed by active citizens, voters, and nonvoters. In addition, between

1984 and 2004, all four groups showed some increase in polarization. However, the increase in polarization among nonvoters was very slight while the increases among voters and active citizens were much larger. According to these results, voters and active citizens were considerably more polarized in 2004 than they were in 1984.

[Figure 1 goes here]

To get some idea of the significance of the increase in polarization between 1984 and 2004, Figure 1 displays bar graphs showing the distribution of scores on the liberal-conservative policy scale among voters in each year. The two distributions look quite different. In 1984, 41 percent of voters were located within one unit of the center of the scale and only 10 percent were located near the left (-7 through -5) and right (5 through 7) extremes. In 2004, only 28 percent of voters were located within one unit of the center and 23 percent were located near the left and right extremes. These results indicate that the 2004 electorate was much more consistent and polarized than the 1984 electorate. While no direct comparison is possible, it seems reasonable to assume that the contrast would be even starker if we could compare the 2004 electorate with the 1956 electorate studied by Converse.

Political Engagement and Ideological Polarization in 2004

While the 2004 electorate was considerably more polarized than the 1984 electorate, ideological divisions were much greater among some types of voters than others. In order to measure ideological consistency and polarization among the American public in 2004, I created a scale based on responses to 16 issues included in the National Election Study survey. The issues ranged from government responsibility for jobs and living standards to gay marriage, health insurance, abortion, defense spending, and gun

control and the scale has a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of .80. Scores on the original scale ranged from -16 for respondents who gave liberal responses to all 16 issues to +16 for respondents who gave conservative responses to all 16 issues. I then recoded the original 33-point scale into an 11-point scale for clarity in presentation.

Table 2 displays the relationship between ideological consistency and three measures of political engagement: interest, knowledge, and participation.¹ The results strongly support the political engagement hypothesis. It was primarily the least interested, least informed, and least politically active Americans who were clustered around the center of the liberal-conservative spectrum. The more interested, informed, and politically active Americans were, the more likely they were to take consistently liberal or consistently conservative positions.

[Table 2 goes here]

The implication of the findings in Table 2 is that the most politically engaged citizens are also the most polarized in their political views. In order to directly test this hypothesis, I combined the political interest, knowledge, and participation scales to create an overall index of political engagement. I then divided the respondents in the 2004 NES sample into three groups of approximately equal size: the least politically engaged, a middle group, and the most politically engaged. The politically engaged group included 37 percent of all respondents in the survey and close to half of the voters.

Figure 2 compares the ideological orientations of the least politically engaged group with the ideological orientations of the most politically engaged group. These results

¹ Interest is measured by a single question asking about interest in the presidential campaign. Knowledge is measured by 10 items including questions about party control of the House and Senate, the jobs held by various political leaders, and ability to accurately place the presidential candidates on a liberal-conservative ideology scale and an abortion policy scale.

strongly support the political engagement hypothesis. The high engagement group was much more polarized in its policy preferences than the low engagement group. Although the means of the two distributions are almost identical (6.1 vs. 6.2), the standard deviation of the high engagement group (2.8) is almost twice as large as the standard deviation of the low engagement group (1.5). Very few individuals in the low engagement group had consistent policy preferences: 13 percent were consistent liberals (1-4) while 19 percent were consistent conservatives (8-11). In contrast, a large proportion of individuals in the high engagement group had fairly consistent policy preferences: 32 percent were consistent liberals while 39 percent were consistent conservatives.

[Figure 2 goes here]

These results indicate that the politically engaged segment of the contemporary American electorate is in fact quite polarized in its political attitudes. This fact has important political implications because candidates and elected officials are likely to be more concerned about the views of the politically engaged than about the views of the politically disengaged. It is the politically engaged who pay attention to the positions taken by candidates and office-holders and who consistently turn out to vote in primaries as well as general elections.

The Growth of Partisan-Ideological Polarization

The political significance of ideological polarization does not just depend on the overall distribution of political attitudes among the public or even among the politically engaged segment of the public, however. It also depends on the extent to which the ideological divisions within the public coincide with partisan divisions—a phenomenon

that I have labeled partisan-ideological polarization. The greater the degree of partisan-ideological polarization in a society, the greater the likelihood that ideological differences will be expressed in the political arena and therefore the greater the intensity of political conflict in that society.

Evidence from the American National Election Studies indicates that partisan-ideological polarization has increased considerably over the past several decades. Figure 3 displays the trend in the correlation between liberal-conservative identification and party identification between 1972, when the ideology question was first included in the NES survey, and 2004. This graph shows that there has been a substantial increase in the strength of the relationship between party identification and ideological identification since 1972 and especially since 1992. In 1972, the correlation between ideology and party identification was .32. In 1992, it was .44. In 2004, it was .63. In statistical terms, this means that the strength of this relationship almost quadrupled: the proportion of variance that these two questions had in common increased from just over 10 percent in 1972 to almost 40 percent in 2004. As a result, the difference between the mean score of Democratic identifiers and the mean score of Republican identifiers on the seven-point liberal-conservative identification scale increased from 0.9 units in 1972 to 1.3 units in 1992 and 1.8 units in 2004. Given the limited range of this scale, this is a substantial increase in polarization—the gap between Democratic and Republican identifiers doubled between 1972 and 2004.

[Figure 3 goes here]

The increase in partisan polarization was not limited to the liberal-conservative identification question, however. Differences between Democratic and Republican

identifiers have increased substantially over the past three decades on a wide range of issues. Table 3 displays the correlations between party identification and positions on six different issues during 1972-1980, 1984-1992, and 1996-2004: the larger the correlation coefficient, the greater the degree of partisan polarization on an issue. On every one of these issues, ranging from jobs and living standards to health insurance to presidential approval, partisan polarization increased substantially.

[Table 3 goes here]

Evaluations of presidential performance have become increasingly polarized along party lines since the 1970s and evaluations of George W. Bush in 2004 were sharply divided along party lines. According to data from the 2004 NES survey, 90 percent of Republican identifiers approved of Bush's performance and 66 percent approved strongly; in contrast, 81 percent of Democratic identifiers disapproved of Bush's performance and 64 percent disapproved strongly. Evaluations of Bush were more divided along party lines than those of any president since the NES began asking the presidential approval question in 1972. However, the highly polarized evaluations of George Bush in 2004 were not unique—they represented a continuation of a trend that goes back several decades: the difference between the percentage of Democratic identifiers approving of the president's performance and the percentage of Republican identifiers approving of the president's performance was 36 points for Richard Nixon in 1972, 42 points for Jimmy Carter in 1980, 52 points for Ronald Reagan in 1988, 55 points for Bill Clinton in 1996, and 71 points for George W. Bush in 2004.

These results indicate that the growing partisan divide in presidential evaluations cannot be explained by changes in the leadership styles or policies of the presidents

themselves. Bill Clinton ran and governed as a moderate Democrat yet evaluations of his performance were much more sharply divided along party lines than evaluations of the performance of earlier presidents. And, in many ways Richard Nixon was at least as divisive a figure as George W. Bush, yet the partisan divide in evaluations of Nixon was only half as large as the partisan divide in evaluations of Bush. The dramatic increase in partisan polarization between these two presidents reflects the fact that the American public has changed and that Democratic and Republican identifiers now hold much more consistent and polarized views across a wide range of policy issues than their counterparts during the 1960s and 1970s.

Political Engagement and Partisan-Ideological Polarization in 2004

The evidence from the 2004 NES survey shows that partisan polarization was not confined to a small group of leaders and activists. The ideological preferences of rank-and-file Democratic and Republican identifiers (including leaning independents) actually differed rather sharply. Democratic identifiers tended to be fairly liberal while Republican identifiers tend to be fairly conservative. This is clear when we compare the distribution of Democratic and Republican identifiers on the 11-point liberal-conservative issue scale. The mean scores on the scale were 5.0 for Democrats compared with 7.5 for Republicans. This difference is highly statistically significant ($p < .001$). It is also substantively significant. Fifty-six percent of Democrats were on the liberal side of the scale (1-5) compared with only 12 percent of Republicans; 73 percent of Republicans were on the conservative side of the scale (7-11) compared with only 21 percent of Democrats.

Partisan-ideological polarization was considerably greater among politically engaged citizens than among the general public. The mean scores on the 11-point liberal-conservative scale were 3.8 for politically engaged Democrats compared with 8.3 for politically engaged Republicans—almost twice as large as the difference between Democratic and Republican identifiers. This difference is both substantively and statistically significant ($p < .001$). Eighty-two percent of politically engaged Democrats were on the liberal side of the scale (1-5) compared with only 7 percent of politically engaged Republicans; 91 percent of politically engaged Republicans were on the conservative side of the scale (7-11) compared with only 12 percent of politically engaged Democrats.

There were large differences between the positions of politically engaged Democrats and Republicans on a wide range of specific issues in 2004. Some of these issue differences are displayed in Table 4. On every one of the eight issues included in Table 4, politically engaged Democrats were much more liberal than politically engaged Republicans. This was true on social issues, economic issues, and foreign policy issues. The smallest differences, 42 percentage points, were on the issues of abortion and the death penalty. The largest difference, 59 percentage points, was on the use of military force vs. diplomacy in the conduct of foreign policy. Across these eight issues, an average of 65 percent of politically engaged Democrats took the liberal position compared with an average of 17 percent of politically engaged Republicans.

[Table 4 goes here]

Politically engaged partisans have always been more polarized along ideological lines than ordinary party identifiers. However, like ordinary party identifiers, politically

engaged partisans have become increasingly polarized over time. In order to measure political engagement over the entire time period between 1972 and 2004 I created an additive scale based on one question asking about interest in the campaign, one question asking how much respondents cared about the outcome of the presidential election, and an index of campaign activities. I coded those who scored at the upper end of this scale as politically engaged. The proportion of respondents classified as politically engaged ranged from 12 percent in 1956 to 26 percent in 2004.

Between 1972 and 2004, the correlation (Pearson's r) between party identification and ideological identification among the most politically engaged citizens increased from .47 to .77. As a result, the difference between the average score of politically engaged Democrats and the average score of politically engaged Republicans on the seven-point liberal-conservative scale increased from 1.4 units in 1972 to 2.7 units in 2008. The level of polarization among politically engaged partisans in 2004 was the highest in the history of the NES despite the fact that the proportion of citizens classified as politically engaged was also the highest in the history of the NES.

Evidence from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study

The remainder of this paper uses a new data set, the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), to present additional evidence about ideological constraint and polarization in the contemporary American electorate. The CCES involved an Internet based survey of voting age Americans conducted by Polimetrix, Inc. on behalf of a consortium of scholars at 37 colleges and universities. Polimetrix uses a sample matching methodology to produce a sample that is representative of the overall U.S. electorate.¹⁰ Registered voters were deliberately over-sampled in order to ensure

adequate coverage of different types of House and Senate contests: the CCES surveyed over 36,000 eligible voters, including over 24,000 who reported voting in the 2006 midterm election.

In order to assess the validity of the evidence from the CCES survey, I compared the characteristics of voters in the CCES sample with the characteristics of voters in the 2006 National Exit Poll (NEP). On most characteristics, including race, gender, and income, the CCES sample was very similar to the NEP sample. Most importantly, the party division of the vote for the House of Representatives in the CCES sample was identical to the party division of the vote in the NEP sample and matched the actual party division of the vote in the election. On a few characteristics, however, the CCES sample differed from the NEP sample. Compared with the NEP sample, the CCES sample included a smaller proportion of respondents over the age of 60, a larger proportion of respondents with only a high school education, and a smaller proportion of college graduates. The CCES sample also included a somewhat larger proportion of self-identified independents than the NEP sample.

Unfortunately, the National Exit Poll did not include questions that would allow one to measure ideological constraint or polarization. However, none of the differences between the CCES sample and the NEP sample would lead one to expect CCES respondents to be more ideologically sophisticated or more polarized in their issue positions than NEP respondents. If anything, the smaller proportion of college graduates and the larger proportion of independents in the CCES sample would lead one to expect a lower level of ideological sophistication and a lower degree of ideological polarization among CCES respondents than among NEP respondents. It seems reasonable, therefore,

to treat the CCES voter sample as representative of the actual midterm electorate in terms of ideological sophistication and polarization.

Ideological Constraint and Polarization in 2006

When asked about their political views, more Americans generally describe themselves as moderate or middle-of-the-road than as either liberal or conservative, and this was true of respondents in both the Cooperative Congressional Election Study and the 2006 National Exit Poll. With regard to ideological identification, the results of the two surveys were very similar. In both surveys, the moderate category was the most popular and self-identified conservatives outnumbered self-identified liberals. In the 2006 NEP, 45 percent of respondents described themselves as moderate, 21 percent as liberal, and 34 percent as conservative. The results were slightly different in the CCES survey because the CCES gave respondents five categories to choose from instead of only three. Just as in the NEP, however, far more CCES respondents placed themselves in the moderate category (38%) than in any other single category and self-identified conservatives (38%) outnumbered self-identified liberals (24%).

Based on their ideological self-identification, CCES respondents, like voters responding to the 2006 NEP, and like respondents in almost every other recent national opinion poll, appear to be a predominantly moderate group. Almost two-fifths of voters in the CCES survey placed themselves exactly in the center of the five-point liberal-conservative scale, while less than one-fifth placed themselves at either the left or right extremes. But liberal-conservative self-identification is only one measure of political ideology. The fact that the moderate label is very popular with American voters does not necessarily mean that the electorate is predominantly moderate, any more than the

popularity of the independent label means that the electorate is predominantly independent. Political scientists have learned that many self-described independents turn out, on closer inspection, to have a clear partisan orientation.¹¹ Similarly, many self-described moderates may turn out, on closer inspection to have a clear ideological orientation.

In order to measure the degree of ideological constraint and polarization in the 2006 electorate, I analyzed the answers provided by CCES respondents to 11 questions dealing with current national issues as well as the ideological identification question. The 11 issues included in this analysis were abortion, partial birth abortion, stem cell research, social security privatization, the minimum wage, environmental protection vs. job protection, affirmative action, capital gains taxes, immigration, and two questions about the war in Iraq, one asking about whether the war had been a mistake and the other asking about withdrawal of U.S. troops.¹² These 11 issues cover a variety of policy domains—cultural and economic, as well as foreign and domestic. One question asking about the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) was dropped from the analysis because responses to this question did not correlate very highly with responses to any of the other issues in the survey. Two other issues, gay marriage and global climate change, were dropped because the questions about these issues were only asked of a sub-sample of respondents who were not, in other respects, representative of the entire sample.

[Table 5 goes here]

Table 5 displays the correlations (Pearson's r) among responses to the 12 items in the CCES for two groups of respondents: voters and nonvoters. All of the items are

coded in a consistent direction, from the most liberal response to the most conservative response, so that a positive correlation indicates consistency. The results in Table 2 show that there was an impressive degree of constraint in the opinions of voters. The average correlation among their responses to these 12 questions was .47. In contrast, the opinions of nonvoters demonstrated a much lower degree of constraint. The average correlation among their responses to the same 12 questions was only .20. Clearly, the opinions of voters on national issues were much more constrained than the opinions of nonvoters.

The correlations among the issue positions of voters in the 2006 CCES were not only much stronger than those of nonvoters; they were also much stronger than the correlations among the issue positions of either the public or the sample of congressional candidates analyzed by Converse.¹³ When the opinions of the CCES voter sample on these 12 items were subjected to a principal component factor analysis, the first dimension extracted by the factor analysis had an Eigen value of 6.3 and explained 52 percent of the common variance and no other factor had an Eigen value of greater than 1.0. The average correlation between the 12 items and the first factor was a robust .72. Moreover, according to an internal consistency analysis, a simple additive scale based on these 12 items had a Cronbach's alpha of .90, well beyond what is generally considered necessary for a satisfactory scale.

These analyses indicate that there is an ideological structure to the opinions of voters that is very similar to the ideological structure of voting in Congress: the responses of voters to these 12 questions largely reflected their positions on a single underlying liberal-conservative dimension just as the votes of members of Congress largely reflect their positions on a single underlying liberal-conservative dimension.¹⁴

There is a very close relationship between constraint and polarization in public opinion: the larger the average correlation among the opinions in a group, the larger the proportion of consistent liberals and consistent conservatives in that group. Thus, based on the correlations in Table 5, I would expect the opinions of voters to be much more polarized than the opinions of nonvoters and this difference is clearly evident in Figure 4 which compares the distributions of voters and nonvoters on the 12-item liberal-conservative scale.

[Figure 4 goes here]

There is a striking difference between the two distributions. The opinions of voters follow a bimodal distribution whereas the opinions of nonvoters follow a unimodal distribution. Only 17 percent of voters fall in the center (between 40 percent conservative and 60 percent conservative) of the distribution while 39 percent of voters fall at either the left (less than 20 percent conservative) or right (80 percent conservative to 100 percent conservative) ends of the scale. In contrast, 41 percent of nonvoters fall in the center of the distribution while only 12 percent fall at the left or right ends of the scale. Based on these results, Fiorina's characterization of the American public as non-ideological appears to apply much better to nonvoters than it does to voters. The large majority of voters in 2006 held fairly consistent opinions on a wide range of national issues. Moreover, these opinions were strongly related to their candidate preferences: voters at the left end of the scale voted almost unanimously for Democratic House and Senate candidates while voters at the right end of the scale voted almost unanimously for Republican House and Senate candidates. In contrast, the minority of voters in the

middle of the scale, those whose opinions were the least consistent, divided their support fairly evenly between the two major parties.

The result of the voting patterns was a very high level of ideological differentiation between Democratic and Republican voters in 2006. There was very little overlap between the two groups of voters on the liberal-conservative scale: 89 percent of Democratic House voters were located to the left of center while 84 percent of Republican House voters were located to the right of center. Democratic House voters had an average score of 28 percent conservative on the scale while Republican House voters had an average score of 70 percent conservative. The Senate pattern was even stronger: 91 percent of Democratic Senate voters were located to the left of center while 88 percent of Republican Senate voters were located to the right of center. Democratic Senate voters had an average score of 27 percent conservative on the scale while Republican Senate voters had an average score of 72 percent conservative. Moreover, the ideologies of Democratic and Republican voters were almost identical in every region of the country. The average score of Democratic House voters was 29 percent conservative in the South, 28 percent conservative in the Northeast, 29 percent conservative in the Midwest, and 25 percent conservative in the West. The average score of Republican House voters was 69 percent conservative in the South, 70 percent conservative in the Northeast, 70 percent conservative in the Midwest, and 72 percent conservative in the West.

There were sharp differences between Democratic and Republican voters on every one of the issues included in the liberal-conservative scale. The largest differences between Democratic and Republican voters in 2006 were over the war in Iraq. Eighty-six

percent of Democratic House voters considered the war a mistake compared with only 17 percent of Republican House voters and 83 percent of Democratic House voters favored a proposal to immediately begin withdrawing American troops from Iraq compared with only 25 percent of Republican House voters. There were also differences of over 50 percentage points on such issues as stem cell research, social security private accounts, and capital gains tax cuts. The smallest difference between Democratic and Republican voters was found on the issue of immigration. Even here, however, there was a difference of 38 percentage points between Democratic and Republican House voters in support for a proposal to allow illegal immigrants to obtain American citizenship. The dramatic differences between the views of Democratic and Republican voters on a wide range of cultural, economic, and national security issues indicate that partisan-ideological polarization in Congress does not exist in a vacuum. Democrats and Republicans in Congress appear to be accurately reflecting the views of their supporters in the electorate.

Partisan-Ideological Polarization in 2006

Recent elections have seen a resurgence of partisanship in the American electorate. The proportion of pure independents in the electorate has been declining since the 1970s while the level of partisan voting has been increasing.¹⁵ The evidence from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study indicates that these trends continued in 2006. According to the CCES data, 91 percent of the voters in the 2006 House and Senate elections identified with or leaned toward one of the two major parties. Ninety percent of Democratic identifiers and leaners and 85 percent of Republican identifiers and leaners voted for their own party's House candidate; 94 percent of Democratic identifiers and

leaners and 87 percent of Republican identifiers and leaners voted for their own party's Senate candidate.

A large part of the explanation for the high level of partisan voting in 2006 and other recent elections is the high level of consistency between party identification and ideology in the American electorate. Among voters in the CCES survey, 94 percent of Democratic identifiers and leaners were found on the left side of the liberal-conservative scale while 88 percent of Republican identifiers and leaners were found on the right side of the scale. Ninety-two percent of liberal Democrats and 90 percent of conservative Republicans voted for their own party's House candidate. In contrast, only 56 percent of conservative Democrats and 48 percent of liberal Republicans voted for their own party's House candidate. Similarly, 96 percent of liberal Democrats and 94 percent of conservative Republicans voted for their own party's Senate candidate while only 63 percent of conservative Democrats and 47 percent of liberal Republicans voted for their own party's Senate candidate.

[Figure 5 goes here]

Figure 5 displays the average score of voters on the liberal-conservative scale in relation to the seven-point party identification scale. These results go a long way toward explaining why independent leaners behave much more like partisans than like pure independents. Independent Democrats were considerably more liberal than weak Democrats and almost as liberal as strong Democrats. Similarly, independent Republicans were considerably more conservative than weak Republicans, although not as conservative as strong Republicans. Ideologically, these independent leaners were much more similar to their co-partisans than to each other. These findings suggest that

the high level of party loyalty of independent leaners in 2006 and other recent elections is based on their ideological orientations, not just a short-term preference for one party or the other. Thus, the findings support the conclusion of Keith et al. that independent leaners should be considered partisans rather than independents.¹⁶

The role of ideology and social background characteristics in the development of partisan identity has been a subject of debate among political scientists.¹⁷ In order to address the issue of the centrality of ideology to partisan identity in the American electorate, I conducted a discriminant analysis of party identification among voters in the CCES survey using ideology and a wide variety of social background characteristics including age, race, gender, education, family income, religion, marital status, and church attendance, to predict Democratic vs. Republican identification. Based on our earlier results indicating that independent leaners should be considered partisans rather than independents, independent leaners were combined with strong and weak identifiers into the two partisan groups. The results of the discriminant analysis are displayed in Table 6.

[Table 6 goes here]

Overall, the variables included in the discriminant analysis correctly classified 91.7 percent of Democratic and Republican identifiers. However, an examination of the standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients in Table 6 shows that one variable had far greater predictive power than any other: ideology. In fact, the liberal-conservative scale alone correctly predicted the party identification of 91.3 percent of voters in the CCES survey. In contrast, all of the social background variables together only correctly predicted the partisan identification of 70.6 percent of voters. Social characteristics added almost no predictive power to ideology alone. Based on these

results, ideology appears to be much more central to voters' partisan identities than social characteristics such as class, gender, and race.

Conclusions

American politics has changed dramatically in the half century since Philip Converse conducted his path-breaking research on belief systems in mass publics. The educational level of the American electorate has risen steadily. Just as importantly, ideological conflict among political elites has greatly intensified. The findings presented in this paper indicate that these changes have had profound consequences for electoral competition in the United States. To a considerable extent, electoral competition in the United States is now structured by ideology. Voters with relatively coherent ideological preferences choose between parties with relatively clear and distinct ideological positions. At least on the electoral side, the conditions for responsible party government have largely been met.

It is important to recognize, however, that the conclusions of this paper regarding the role of ideology in structuring mass political behavior in the United States apply mainly to the politically engaged segment of the public. Data from the 2004 American National Election Study and the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study indicate that ideological constraint and polarization were much greater among voters than among nonvoters. Whether the lack of consistency evident in the opinions of nonvoters reflects fundamental cognitive limitations, lack of interest in the issues that dominate the contemporary political agenda or genuine ambivalence about these issues remains unclear. As the role of ideological conflict in the electoral process increases, however, there is a risk that those citizens who for whatever reason lack a consistent ideological

outlook will become increasingly alienated from the two major parties and from the electoral process itself. The American public appears to be increasingly divided into two groups: the politically engaged, who view politics in ideological terms, and the politically disengaged, who do not.

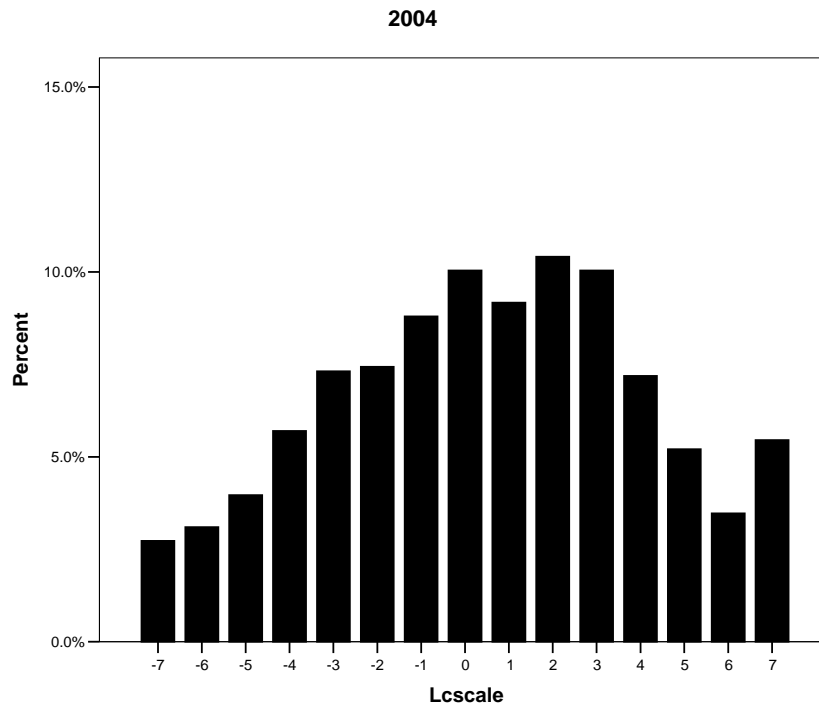
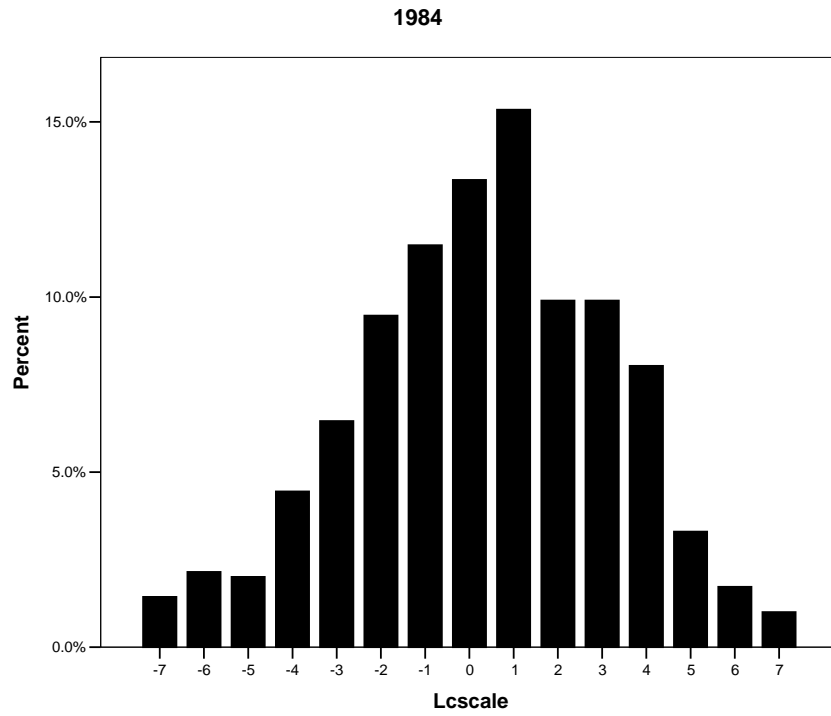
Table 1. Polarization on Seven-Item Policy Scale by Political Engagement, 1984-2004

	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	Change
Nonvoters	2.52	2.52	2.44	2.60	2.68	2.67	+ 6%
Voters	2.89	3.13	3.15	3.39	3.31	3.60	+25%
Active citizens	3.15	3.50	3.48	3.70	3.59	3.89	+23%
Campaigners	3.74	3.50	3.75	4.10	3.71	4.27	+14%

Note: Entries are standard deviations of scores on seven-item policy scale. Items included in scale are liberal-conservative identification, defense spending, abortion, aid to blacks, jobs and living standards, health insurance, and spending vs. services. Scores on scale range from -7 (consistently liberal) to +7 (consistently conservative). Active citizens engaged in at least one activity beyond voting. Campaigners engaged in at least two activities beyond voting.

Source: NES Cumulative File

Figure 1. Polarization of Voters on Seven-Item Policy Scale in 1984 and 2004



Source: NES Cumulative File

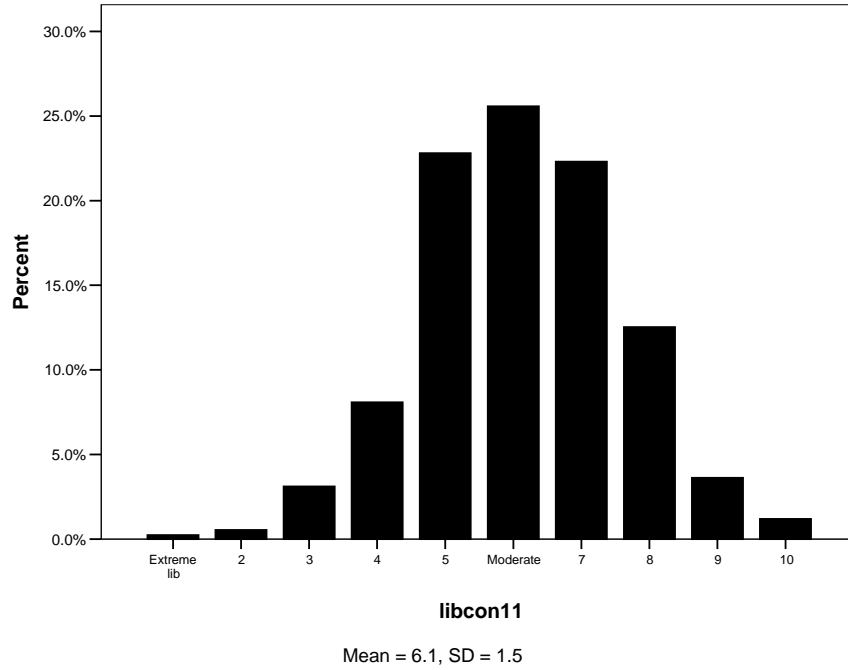
Table 2. Political Engagement and Ideological Consistency in 2004

	Ideological Consistency			Total
	Low	Moderate	High	
Campaign Interest				
Moderate to Low	40%	33	27	100%
High	24%	27	49	100%
Political Knowledge				
Low (0-4)	44%	38	18	100%
Moderate (5-7)	30%	29	41	100%
High (8-10)	15%	19	66	100%
Participation				
Low (0-1)	39%	35	26	100%
Moderate (2)	30%	30	40	100%
High (3+)	17%	18	65	100%

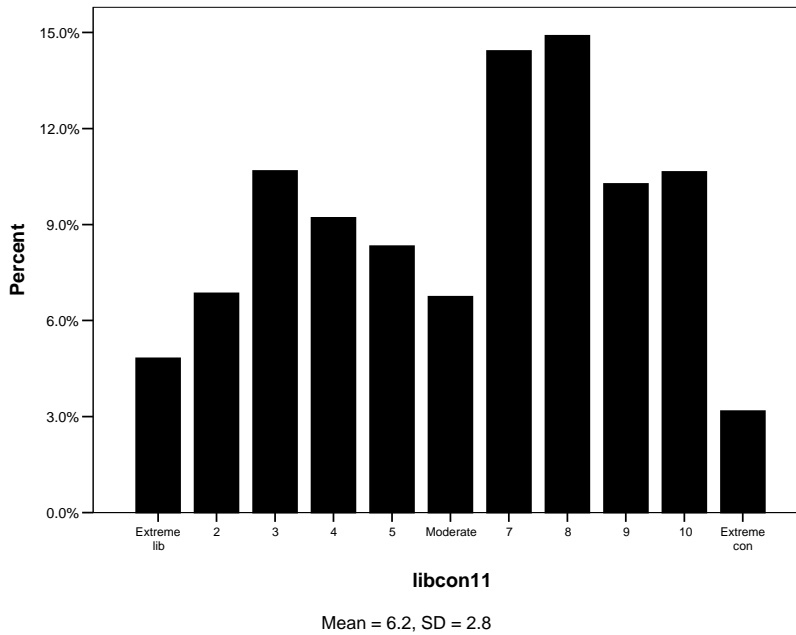
Source: 2004 National Election Study

Figure 2. Ideological Polarization of U.S. Electorate in 2004 by Level of Political Engagement

A. Least Engaged Third

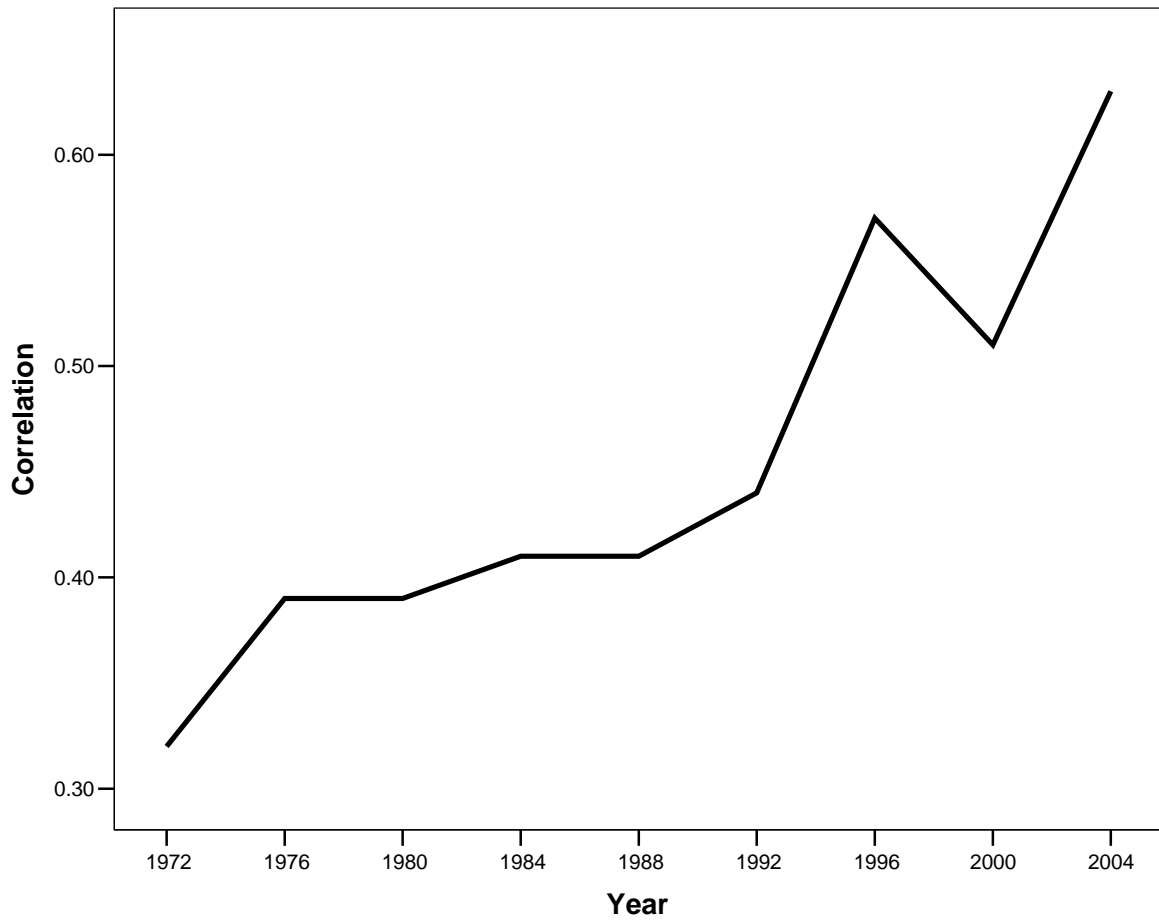


B. Most Engaged Third



Source: 2004 National Election Study

Figure 3. Correlation of Party Identification with Liberal-Conservative Identification, 1972-2004



Note: Correlation coefficient is Pearson's r based on 7-point party identification scale and 7-point liberal-conservative identification scale.

Source: American National Election Studies

Table 3. Trends in Partisan Polarization on Issues, 1972-2004

Issue	1972-1980	1984-1992	1996-2004
Aid to Blacks	.20	.27	.35
Abortion	- .03	.08	.18
Jobs/Living Standards	.28	.34	.40
Health Insurance	.25	.31	.39
Lib/Con Id	.42	.49	.62
Presidential Approval	.42	.56	.61
Average	.26	.34	.43

Note: Entries shown are average correlations (Kendall's tau) between issues and party identification (strong, weak, and independent Democrats vs. strong weak and independent Republicans).

Source: American National Election Studies

Table 4. Policy Liberalism among Politically Engaged Partisans in 2004

Issue	Democrats	Republicans
Abortion	67%	25%
Death Penalty	52%	10%
Diplomacy vs. Force	74%	15%
Environment vs. Jobs	74%	27%
Gay Marriage	69%	18%
Jobs/Living Standards	52%	9%
Health Insurance	66%	16%
Spending/Services	65%	18%

Source: 2004 National Election Study

Table 5. Product-Moment Correlations among 12 Issues in CCES

A. Voters

	abortion	affirm action	capgains taxcut	enviro vs. jobs	libcon id	immig	iraq withdraw	iraq mistake	min wage	partial birth	ss private	stem cell
abortion	1.000	.364	.431	.417	.575	.289	.473	.548	.382	.602	.478	.634
affirm action	.364	1.000	.448	.405	.503	.412	.451	.494	.428	.370	.474	.407
capgains taxcut	.431	.448	1.000	.455	.537	.300	.559	.590	.483	.430	.611	.501
enviro vs. jobs	.417	.405	.455	1.000	.487	.313	.455	.505	.430	.401	.487	.468
libcon id	.575	.503	.537	.487	1.000	.395	.563	.621	.478	.510	.545	.586
immig	.289	.412	.300	.313	.395	1.000	.318	.362	.287	.287	.298	.317
iraq withdraw	.473	.451	.559	.455	.563	.318	1.000	.715	.535	.437	.578	.557
iraq mistake	.548	.494	.590	.505	.621	.362	.715	1.000	.520	.505	.653	.617
min wage	.382	.428	.483	.430	.478	.287	.535	.520	1.000	.353	.504	.494
late abortion	.602	.370	.430	.401	.510	.287	.437	.505	.353	1.000	.479	.524
ss private	.478	.474	.611	.487	.545	.298	.578	.653	.504	.479	1.000	.541
stem cell	.634	.407	.501	.468	.586	.317	.557	.617	.494	.524	.541	1.000

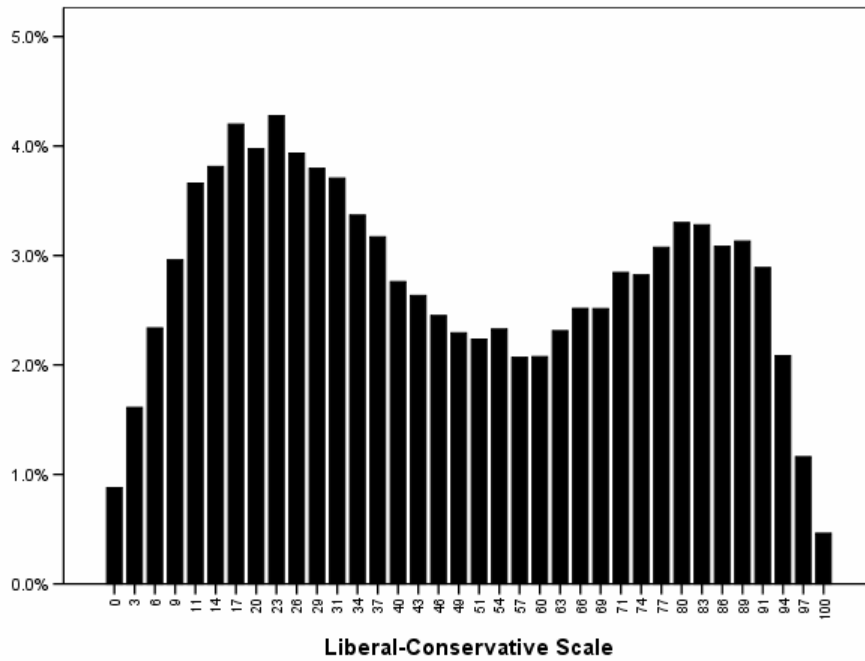
B. Nonvoters

	abortion	affirm act	capgains taxcut	enviro vs. jobs	libcon id	immig	iraq withdrawal	iraq mistake	min wage	partial birth	ss private	stem cell
abortion	1.000	.101	.141	.135	.403	.105	.187	.265	.115	.429	.197	.478
affirm act	.101	1.000	.188	.126	.259	.268	.189	.227	.217	.130	.134	.146
capgains taxcut	.141	.188	1.000	.178	.255	.061	.237	.239	.232	.147	.251	.149
enviro vs. jobs	.135	.126	.178	1.000	.254	.169	.146	.214	.164	.146	.131	.214
libcon id	.403	.259	.255	.254	1.000	.214	.278	.358	.222	.300	.205	.373
immig	.105	.268	.061	.169	.214	1.000	.112	.183	.104	.117	.082	.140
iraq withdraw	.187	.189	.237	.146	.278	.112	1.000	.445	.305	.144	.197	.240
iraq mistake	.265	.227	.239	.214	.358	.183	.445	1.000	.179	.237	.297	.266
min wage	.115	.217	.232	.164	.222	.104	.305	.179	1.000	.058	.201	.205
partial birth	.429	.130	.147	.146	.300	.117	.144	.237	.058	1.000	.164	.304
ss private	.197	.134	.251	.131	.205	.082	.197	.297	.201	.164	1.000	.148
stem cell	.478	.146	.149	.214	.373	.140	.240	.266	.205	.304	.148	1.000

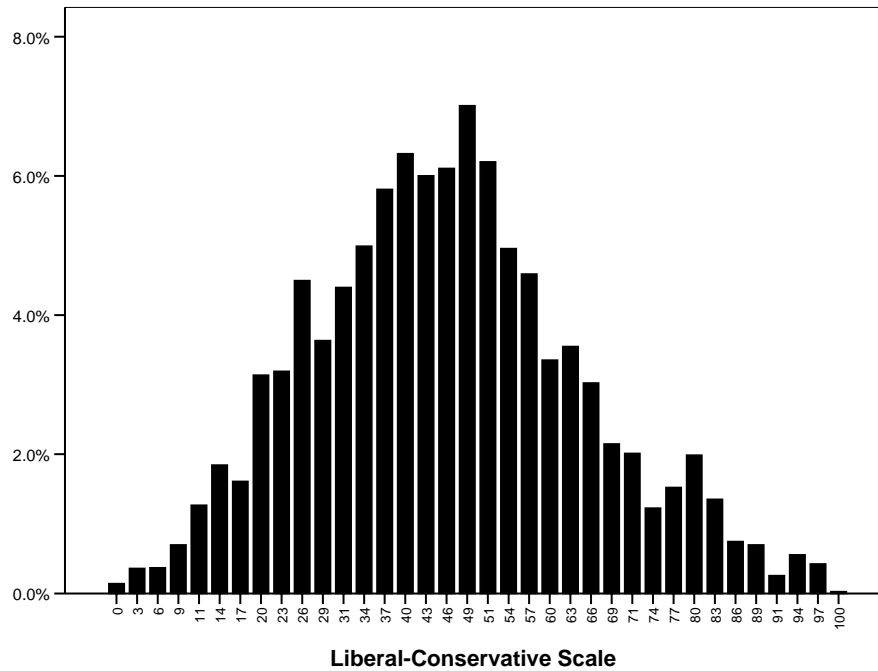
Source: 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study

Figure 4. Distribution of Voters and Nonvoters on Liberal-Conservative Issues Scale

A. Voters

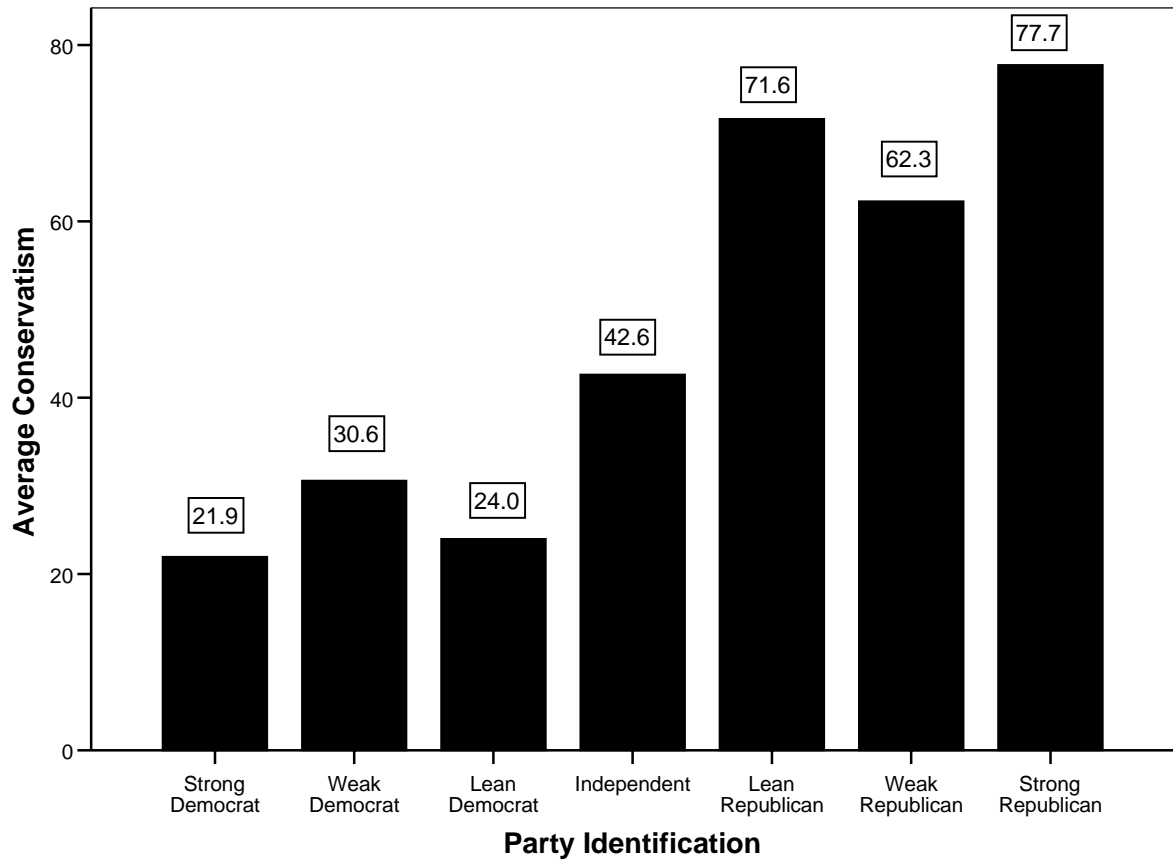


B. Nonvoters



Source: 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study

Figure 5. Average Conservatism of Voters in 2006 Midterm Election by Party Identification



Source; 2006 CCES

Table 6. Results of Discriminant Analysis of 2006 Party Identification

Standardized Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients

	Function
	1
Age	.025
Education	.096
Gender	-.024
Family income	.071
Marital status	.007
Black	-.159
Hispanic	-.013
Other race	-.013
Catholic	-.058
Jewish	-.022
Other religion	-.033
No religion	-.038
Church attendance	-.030
Ideology	.977

Canonical Correlation = .831
Percentage Correctly Classified = 91.7

Note: Predicted groups are strong, weak, and independent Democrats vs. strong, weak, and independent Republicans.

Source: 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study

¹ Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: The Free Press, 1964).

² Christopher H. Achen, "Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 69 (1975), pp. 1218-1231.

³ Norman H. Nie and Kristi Anderson, "Mass Belief Systems Revisited: Political Change and Attitude Structure," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 36 (1974), pp. 540-591; Norman H. Nie and James N. Rabjohn, "Revisiting Mass Belief Systems Revisited: Or, Doing Research is Like Watching a Tennis Match," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23 (1979), pp. 139-175; James A. Stimson, "Belief Systems: Constraint, Complexity, and the 1972 Election," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 19 (1975), pp. 393-417.

⁴ George F. Bishop, Robert W. Oldenick, Alfred J. Tuchfarber, and Stephen E. Bennett, "The Changing Structure of Mass Belief Systems: Fact or Artifact," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 40 (1978), pp. 781-787; John L. Sullivan, James E. Piereson, George E. Marcus, and Stanley Feldman, "The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: The Stability of Mass Belief Systems," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23 (1979), pp. 176-186.

⁵ Philip E. Converse, "Democratic Theory and Electoral Reality," *Critical Review*, Vol. 18 (2006), pp. 297-329.

⁶ Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Poole and Rosenthal, "D-Nominate After 10 Years: A Comparative Update to Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 26 (2001), pp. 5-29;

Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Mark D. Brewer, and Mack D. Mariani, *Diverging Parties: Social Change, Realignment, and Party Polarization* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003);

Ronald Brownstein, *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007).

⁷ Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 60 (1998), pp. 634-652; Marc J. Hetherington, “Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95 (2001), pp. 619-631; Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey, “Party Polarization and ‘Conflict Extension’ in the American Electorate,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 46 (2002), pp. 786-802.

⁸ Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), p. 19.

⁹ Donald R. Kinder, “Belief Systems Today,” *Critical Review*, Vol. 18 (Winter 2006), pp. 197-216.

¹⁰ For a detailed explanation of the sampling procedure used in this survey, see Douglas Rivers, “Sample Matching: Representative Sampling from Internet Panels,” unpublished paper available at: www.polimetrix.com.

¹¹ Bruce E. Keith, David B. Magleby, Candice J. Nelson, Elizabeth Orr, Mark Westlye, and Raymond W. Wolfinger, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

¹² The wording of the questions included in the CCES survey can be found on the Cooperative Congressional Election Study website.

¹³ Converse (1964).

¹⁴ Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

¹⁵ Larry M. Bartels, "Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1972-1996," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 44 (2000), pp. 35-50.

¹⁶ Keith, Magleby, Nelson, Orr, Westlye, and Wolfinger (1992).

¹⁷ Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, "Exploring the Bases of Partisanship in the American Electorate: Social Identity vs. Ideology," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 59 (2006), pp. 175-188.