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# Who Fits the Left-Right Divide? Partisan Polarization in the American Electorate

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Edward G. Carmines<sup>1</sup>, Michael J. Ensley<sup>2</sup>,  
and Michael W. Wagner<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

How has the American public responded to elite partisan polarization? Using panel data from both the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project and the American National Election Studies, we explore the partisan consequences of the discrepancy between the one-dimensional structure of elite policy preferences and the two-dimensional structure of citizens' policy preferences. We find that those citizens with preferences that are consistently liberal or consistently conservative across both economic and social issues have responded to elite polarization with mass polarization. However, we also find that the sizable number of citizens who hold preferences on economic and social issues that do not perfectly match the menu of options provided by elite Republicans and Democrats have not responded to elite polarization; indeed, these citizens are more likely to shift their partisan allegiance in the short-term and less likely to strengthen their party identification in the long term.

## Keywords

polarization, political parties, ideology, public opinion, representation

American political parties have undergone a fundamental transformation during the last several decades. Once seen as ideologically heterogeneous and lacking well-defined policy positions, both parties have staked out more clearly defined ideologically oriented positions during recent decades—hence, the growing polarization of the American party system. This polarization has two primary characteristics. The first is

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<sup>1</sup>Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

<sup>2</sup>Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA

<sup>3</sup>University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Michael W. Wagner, University of Wisconsin, 5046 Vilas Hall, 821 University Ave., Madison, WI 53706, USA.  
Email: [mwagner8@wisc.edu](mailto:mwagner8@wisc.edu)

that it has led to an emptying of the ideological center of both parties and the complete absence of ideological overlap of the Republican and Democratic members of Congress. Indeed, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) show that the most liberal Republican member of Congress is now more conservative than the most conservative Democrat—or alternatively stated, the ideological separation between the parties has grown in recent decades; liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans dominate elite party politics and there are fewer moderates in both parties.

The second characteristic of this polarization is that virtually all policy conflict in Congress and among party elites more generally can now be expressed along a single broad liberal-conservative dimension (McCarty et al., 2006). This means that for partisan elites, their preferences on economic and social-welfare issues like health care, social security, and tax policy are part of the same ideological dimension as their preferences on social and cultural issues like abortion and gay rights. These characteristics—ideological homogeneity within party coupled with ideological separation between parties where all policy issues can be represented by a single dominant liberal-conservative ideological dimension—make the current American party system distinct from its recent predecessors and more similar to a typical European parliamentary system (Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994). But what impact has this partisan polarization had on the mass public? Have they followed elite polarization into a sharp, clear division of their own, or have they largely ignored the elite divide, becoming increasingly disconnected from the contemporary two-party system?

While much “red and blue” ink has been spilled over whether elite polarization is mirrored by the public, existing research provides no consensus when it comes to answering this question. On the one hand, some scholars argue that if citizens take cues from party elites—as recent research suggests they do—then they should come to resemble party elites by becoming more ideologically oriented partisans (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Carsey & Layman, 2006; Hetherington, 2001). On the other hand, if party elites have become more ideologically extreme, but the public continues to have moderate and ambivalent policy preferences, then the electorate may have become increasingly disenchanted with both political parties (Fiorina, 2005). American politics is increasingly characterized by what Fiorina has recently termed *disconnect*, which he claims amounts to the breakdown of representation in American politics (Fiorina, 1999). In this case, elite polarization does not lead to a resurgence in mass partisanship and a more engaged public but the opposite: a decline and weakening of partisan identities coupled with disengagement from politics for scores of Americans.

Both of these perspectives contain a kernel of truth, but neither, we believe, adequately takes into account the ideological diversity of the American electorate and thus fails to provide a comprehensive and fully accurate picture of polarization in the American electorate. Most importantly, unlike political elites, the ideological orientations of the public cannot be reduced to a single liberal-conservative dimension. In fact, research going back to Converse (1964) has demonstrated that mass policy preferences cannot be represented along a single left-right ideological dimension (see also Claggett & Shafer, 2010). Instead, the domestic policy preferences of the public vary

along two principal dimensions, a first dimension associated with economic and social-welfare issues and a second dimension dominated by social and cultural issues (Carmines, Ensley, & Wagner, 2011; Shafer & Claggett, 1995<sup>1</sup>). While the preferences of party elites on these two dimensions are closely aligned—hence, the single dimensional structure of elite opinion—for most of the public the economic and social ideological dimensions are separate and only moderately correlated.

We pose a simple but fundamental question about the nature of representative democracy: What are the political consequences of the discrepancy between the one-dimensional structure of elite policy preferences and the two-dimensional structure of citizens' policy preferences? In this article, we cast a revealing light on this question by providing empirical evidence of a new, fundamental insight into the polarization debate and the essential character of contemporary American politics more generally by demonstrating that the extent to which the electorate is polarized is conditional on the structure of mass policy preferences.

We show that partisan polarization in the American electorate is best explained by understanding how well individuals' issue preferences, across both social and economic issues, fit the contemporary issues divide among partisan elites. We empirically demonstrate that citizens who have views that are ideologically consistent with political elites across both social and economic issues have become increasingly polarized in their partisan orientations from each other. However, citizens who have ideologically inconsistent, or mixed, preferences are stuck between two parties that are not able to provide them comprehensive representation and are no more likely to strongly identify with one major party than they were during the 1970s. Those who we call ideologically consistent liberals and conservatives, then, are decidedly polarized from one another and hold intensified partisan associations consistent with a deeply divided electorate. On the other hand, the ideologically inconsistent<sup>2</sup> libertarians, communitarians, and moderates whose issue preferences do not match those of either major party do not have partisan attitudes that befit a polarized society. Instead, they remain ambivalent, regularly shifting their allegiances between the Republican and Democratic Parties and showing no signs of an overall increase in partisanship.

In sum, our article explains how elite polarization has impacted both ideologically consistent and ideologically inconsistent citizens, drawing the former into a close web of ideologically centered partisan and polarized politics while leading the latter away from the strident choices represented in the current party system. Our research contributes to the ongoing debate about polarization in the mass electorate by examining the fundamental and wide-ranging partisan implications resulting from the multidimensional structure of mass issue opinion.

## Mass Partisanship in American Politics

Partisan identification is the single most important force identified by researchers investigating the political attitudes and behavior of American citizens and voters. Since the seminal work of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960), scholars

have recognized that an individual's self-professed affiliation with one of the two major parties in the United States is the single most significant predictor of vote choice, political participation, and attitudes towards issues. Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated that partisan identification colors individual perception of current political events and figures (Bartels, 2002).

While it clearly holds a prominent position in the literature on public opinion and electoral behavior, there is still significant disagreement among researchers as to whether partisan identification is a stable, unwavering belief or whether it is a mutable attitude that responds to changing circumstances. The view of Campbell et al. (1960) is that a deeply held loyalty towards a particular party is acquired early in life, usually through a process of parental socialization. This loyalty remains remarkably stable throughout one's adult life and shapes the individual's views about issues, political figures, and events (Bartels, 2002; Gerber & Jackson, 1993; Goren, 2004; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Rahn, 1993). Other scholars have argued that partisanship is mutable (Bassili, 1995; Carsey & Layman, 2006; Fiorina, 1981; Franklin & Jackson, 1983; Lockerbie, 2002; MacKuen, Stimson, & Erikson, 1992). These scholars claim that partisan identification at the individual and aggregate level is responsive to political and social events, such a political scandal or change in economic conditions, and to individuals' attitudes about important issues.

We do not wish to adjudicate directly between these competing claims about the stability of partisanship or its responsiveness to short-term economic and political events. However, we do argue that there are significant changes in partisan identification attributable to the growing polarization of party elites in the United States. Even the staunchest defenders of the supremacy and stability of partisanship note that there can be a significant shift in partisanship: "To argue that political events seldom impact partisan identities is compatible with the claim that events do matter under certain circumstances. Party platforms and performance in office from time to time touch on these partisan self-conceptions" (Green et al., 2002, p. 11).

Without denying the preeminent place that partisan identification has on the American citizen, we provide evidence below that some citizens have adjusted their partisanship to respond to the most important change in American politics in the last four decades: ideological polarization among partisan elites (see also Levendusky, 2009). Furthermore, we show that this response is mediated by an individual's positions on economic issues and social issues and, in particular, on the extent to which the structure of their positions reflects the structure of elite issue positions.

Some leading accounts of polarization suggest that elite party polarization has led to a strengthening of partisan attitudes in the electorate, resulting in "resurgent mass partisanship" (Hetherington, 2001) and a "disappearing center" in the electorate (Abramowitz, 2010). We show that this characterization is apt but only for a specific and limited subset of the American electorate. Indeed, we show that the citizens' partisan identification is informed by the interaction of their own policy preferences and the policy choices offered by elite Republicans and Democrats (Jackman & Sniderman, 2002; Sniderman, 2000; Sniderman & Bullock, 2006). Voters whose mix of issue

positions reflects those found among Republican and Democratic Party elites have indeed strengthened their partisanship during recent decades. That is, citizens who have conservative preferences on both economic issues and social issues have become much more Republican during this period, while voters with liberal positions on economic issues and social issues have become more Democratic. However, and once again, other distinctive issue groups in the electorate—namely, citizens who have liberal preferences on one issue dimension but conservative positions on the other or have moderate positions on both economic and social issues—have not experienced any increase in partisanship. On the contrary, even as party elites have sharply diverged during recent decades these issue groups have become no more connected to the party system, locating themselves between the increasingly polarized liberals and conservatives.

### **Elite Polarization, Issue Consistency, and Party Identification**

Although scholars disagree on how polarization has affected the American populace, political scientists have been aware that changes in elite polarization do affect citizens' perceptions and attitudes toward the parties (Abramowitz, 2006; Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Carsey & Layman, 2006; Fiorina, 2005; Layman & Carsey, 2002). Notably, Hetherington (2001) argued that greater ideological polarization among party elites has clarified the parties' ideological positions for ordinary Americans, which in turn has led to a major resurgence in partisanship in the electorate during the last several decades. Specifically he shows that difference in favorability of the parties and the perceptions of partisan differences have grown as the parties have diverged. Unexamined by Hetherington (2001), however, is whether actual mass *party identification* has responded to elite party polarization. Partisan identification is less malleable and more resistant to change than other political and partisan attitudes (Green et al., 2002). Consequently, it is not clear whether elite polarization influences the increasingly polarized partisan identifications in the electorate as opposed to voters' more ephemeral partisan attitudes.

Moreover, even if elite party polarization has led to the strengthening of mass partisan identifications, it may not have done so for the entire electorate. During the last several decades the two major parties have increasingly offered distinctive issue packages to the electorate. Thus, the parties now differ not only on the traditional social welfare and economic issues that dominated the New Deal era but also on the more recent social issues like abortion and gay rights. The Republican Party has staked out consistently conservative stands on both economic issues and social issues, while the Democratic Party has embraced liberal positions on both issue dimensions (Layman, 2001). So, if elite party polarization has revived partisanship in the electorate, as Hetherington (2001) argues, this revival may have been confined to citizens who themselves hold consistently liberal or consistently conservative issue positions. Consistent liberals, by this account, should have become more Democratic over the

last several decades, while consistent conservatives should have moved in the opposite direction, becoming more Republican in their partisan identifications.

Voters with consistently liberal or consistently conservative issue preferences, however, only constitute a portion of the entire American electorate. In fact, much of the electorate continues to hold moderate centrist views on most political issues even on such contentious issues as abortion and gay rights—a situation that has not changed dramatically in recent years (Fiorina, 2005). As Fiorina (2005) observes, “reports of an American population polarized around moral and religious issues—or any other issue for that matter—are greatly exaggerated” (p. 33). There is no reason to suspect that elite party polarization has stimulated a revival in partisanship among moderate centrist citizens (Dionne, 1991; King, 1997). On the contrary, since issue moderates may be wedged between an increasingly liberal Democratic Party and an increasingly conservative Republican Party, they may locate themselves close to the middle of the party identification scale instead of strengthening their identification with either party.

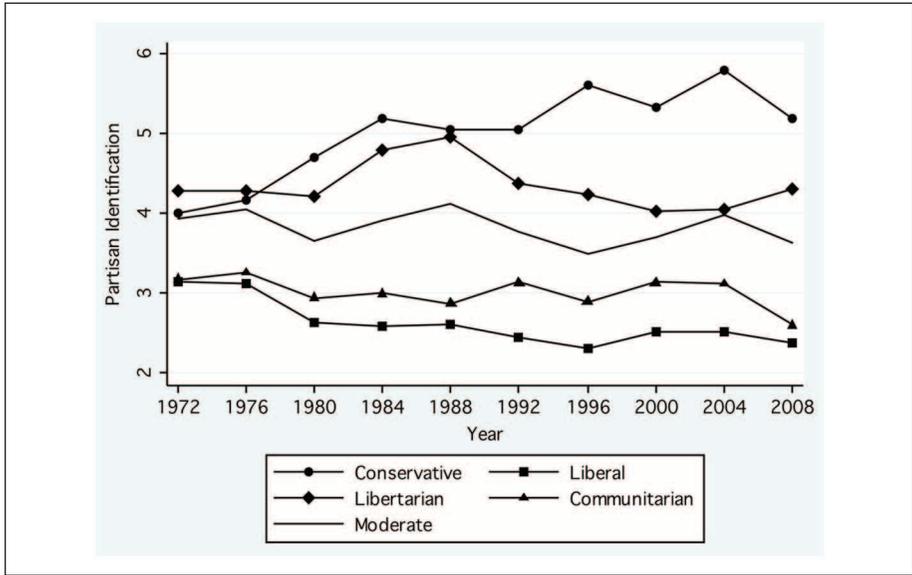
Nor should citizens with inconsistent positions across issue dimensions have strengthened their ties to either party in recent decades. As party elites have increasingly polarized in a consistently liberal or conservative direction, citizens with libertarian (voters who hold conservative positions on economic issue but liberal positions on social issues) and communitarian (voters who hold liberal positions on economic issues but conservative positions on social issues) views have become increasingly cross-pressured—preferring the Republican party position on one issue dimension but the Democratic party position on the other issue dimension. As a result, neither group should have increased their identification with either party.

In sum, unlike consistent liberals and consistent conservatives, voters holding moderate issue positions as well as those libertarians and communitarians with inconsistent or heterodox issue preferences should not have strengthened their partisanship during recent decades. If we are correct, the actual resurgence in mass partisanship should be confined to a fairly narrow segment of the American electorate: those who have views that fit the contemporary elite divide.

## **Issue Attitudes and Partisanship, 1972-2008**

To examine the relationship between partisan identification and issue positions, we utilize ANES data on citizens' issue positions from 1972 to 2008. We identified any issues within each ANES survey that pertained to either the economic or social issue dimensions. The appendix provides a description of the survey questions used, the multiple imputation procedure used to handle the missing data, and the confirmatory factor analysis procedure we used to create the scores for respondents on each issue dimension. The scores are created such that higher values indicate a more conservative position. Furthermore, the factor scores are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

We split the survey respondents on the economic and social issue dimensions into thirds based the 33rd and 67th percentiles of the distribution for each dimension.



**Figure 1.** Partisan Identification by Ideological Type, 1972-2008

Individuals that fall in the upper (lower) third of each dimension are classified as *Conservatives* (*Liberals*). Individuals who are liberal (in the lower third) on the economic dimension and conservative (in the upper third) of the social dimension we label as *Communitarians*. Individuals who are liberal (in the lower third) on the social dimension and conservative (in the upper third) of the economic dimension we label as *Libertarians*. Finally, individuals that are in the middle third of each dimension we label as *Moderates*.

Figure 1 presents the average score on the 7-point ANES partisan identification scale for these five issue groups from 1972 to 2008. Remarkably, the average scores of all five groups in 1972 were located bunched together within a single unit of the pure independent category (a score of 4 on the 1 to 7 scale). Notably, the difference between conservative and liberal is only approximately one unit on the 7-point scale. Clearly, in 1972, citizens’ issue attitudes and their partisan identifications were only weakly aligned. However, by the end of the time series, the difference between these two groups more than doubled to about 2.5 points. Thus, the average difference between liberals and conservatives (ideologically consistent individuals) on the partisan identification scale is 2.5 times larger in 2008 when compared to 1972. The average conservative has a partisan identification somewhere between a weak Republican and leaning Republican, whereas the average liberal has a partisan identification somewhere between a weak Democrat and a leaning Democrat.

On the other hand, those we have labeled as moderates have remained consistently close to the midpoint of the partisan identification scale throughout this period. There

has been some movement among the respondents in this group, notably a move toward the Republican end of the scale in the 1980s and a move toward the Democratic Party in 2008. However, clearly as a group those individuals that are moderate on both major policy dimensions do not tend to favor either party. On average ideologically moderate voters remain independent of the two major parties.

Potentially the most interesting change is with respect to the libertarians. The average libertarian was slightly more Republican than the average conservative in 1972. However, by 2008 the average conservative was approximately one unit closer to the strong Republican designation compared to the average libertarian. In 2004, the difference between the two groups was close to two units on the scale. Thus, conservatives have become considerably more Republican since 1972 (Levendusky, 2009), whereas those we label as libertarians have remained relatively unchanged. The average libertarian in 1972 and 2008 was approximately a 4 on the partisan identification scale, or in other words, an independent identifier. This makes sense as the Republican Party began taking actively conservative positions on social issues like abortion (holding positions not favored by libertarians) in the early 1980s, solidifying themselves as the pro-life party by the early 1990s just as the Democrats became synonymous with being the pro-choice party (Adams, 1997; Carmines, Gerrity, & Wagner, 2010).

Finally, consider the communitarians. In 1972, the average communitarian leaned toward the Democratic Party, as did the average liberal. In terms of partisan identification, liberals and communitarians were indistinguishable. However, over that last few decades the liberals have become consistently more Democratic, whereas the average communitarian has remained relatively unchanged. Except for a dip toward the Democratic Party in 2008, the identification of the average communitarian has remained consistently around leaning Democratic. Thus, just as libertarians remained relatively unresponsive to changes in elite partisan polarization, so too have the communitarians not changed their identification much in response to these changes at the elite level.

In 1972, citizens' issue preferences were only weakly aligned with their partisan identifications. Over the next several decades this relationship has become much stronger.<sup>3</sup> By 2008 liberals and conservatives had moved steadily apart and toward the extremes on the partisan identification scale. They are now separated by approximately 3 points on the 7-point partisan identification scale. In contrast, communitarians, libertarians, and moderates have changed little as a group over this same time frame. As we expected, these individuals are now located between the increasingly Republican conservatives and the increasingly Democratic liberals.

## **Change in Partisanship at the Individual Level**

While the preceding analysis offers strong support for our argument, it only examines changes at the aggregate level. This approach can be problematic for several reasons. First, the preceding analysis does not control for other potential determinants of partisan identification. More importantly, we need to consider an important alternative

hypothesis. We must consider that individuals could be changing their issue attitudes to reflect their partisanship (Carsey & Layman, 2006; Gerber & Jackson, 1993). Thus, it may be that those individuals that are Republican or Democratic identifiers adjust their orientation on economic and social issues to match favored partisan elites. Also, the changes in partisan identification we report in Figure 1 might be attributable to generational replacement in the electorate (Green et al., 2002). In other words, it may be young voters entering the electorate for the first time that may be responding to the polarized choices presented to them, whereas older established voters may be holding strong to their partisan allegiance. In other words, the preceding analysis does not demonstrate conclusively that it is a shift in partisanship among individuals that is driving the divergence in partisan identification.

Without dismissing these explanations as important factors in accounting for the dynamics of partisan identification, we do want to provide direct evidence that voters are responding to elite partisan polarization by reconsidering their own orientation. Furthermore, we would like to ensure that the relationship holds while controlling for other possible determinants of partisan identification. In order to do this, we do two things below. First, we show that partisan identification in the short run is less stable for those individuals with ideologically inconsistent issue attitudes. Using a survey in which individuals were interviewed approximately 8 months apart in 2008, we show that libertarians and communitarians were more likely to change their partisan identification over this short time frame.

Second, using two ANES surveys where respondents were re-interviewed 4 years apart, we show that liberals and conservatives were more likely to become stronger partisans, whereas libertarians and communitarians were more likely to adopt a weaker partisan identification. Specifically, we consider two important periods: 1992-1996 and 2000-2004. The former period is important because the Republican Party assumed control of both chambers of Congress simultaneously for the first time in over 40 years. Furthermore, the new members of the Republican Party in Congress were considerably more conservative than the moderate Democrats they replaced, thus considerably increasing the ideological divide between the two parties in Congress (Aldrich & Rohde, 1997-1998; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997, 2007). The second period analyzed is the first term of President George W. Bush, who has been one of the most ideologically polarizing presidents in contemporary times (Jacobson, 2007). These two periods allow us to assess how a specific individual's partisan identification responded over two time periods in which the party elites have become explicitly more polarized.

### *Stability of Partisanship*

When individuals are cross-pressured, meaning that there are competing beliefs or considerations bearing on an object that individuals must evaluate, their attitudes towards the object are affected in several ways. Notably, their evaluations tend to be more neutral or moderate, they express more uncertainty in their evaluation, and their attitudes are less stable (Alvarez & Brehm, 2002; McGraw & Glathar, 1994). It is the

last of these effects that we evaluate here. Specifically, if citizens are cross-pressured because they have liberal positions on one issue dimension but conservative positions on the other dimension, we expect that their partisan identification is more likely to change when asked at different time points.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, those individuals who are liberal or conservative on both the economic and social issue dimensions should be much more stable in expressing their partisan identification. In short, there should be greater variability within individuals who are libertarians or communitarians.

The survey data from this analysis come from the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) study, which was a multi-wave panel survey in which respondents were interviewed between January and November about the 2008 election. The respondents analyzed here were interviewed in March and then interviewed again after the election in November. In both waves, the respondents were asked their partisan identification, using the same branching format employed by the ANES. We coded whether the respondent's identification on the 7-point partisan identification change between March and November (1 = *changed*, 0 = *the same*). In the sample reported here, approximately 36% of individuals moved at least one position on the 7-point scale. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, we analyzed the change in identification using a probit model.

Our guiding hypothesis is that individuals that possess inconsistent attitudes across the economic and social issues dimensions will be more likely to change their identification than consistent individuals. Furthermore, we also expect that moderates will be more likely to change their identification than consistently liberal or consistently conservative citizens, as they are wedged between two parties, neither of which is representative of their moderate issue preferences. To test these hypotheses, we created factor scores for CCAP respondents in the same manner as we did for the ANES respondents. Given that we must distinguish between those individuals that have mixed positions across the two dimensions from those that have consistent positions, as well as the voters that have moderate positions, we include two additional variables in the regression models reported below.

To measure the effect of issue Consistency on partisan identification, we multiplied together the scores for the Economic and Social dimensions. Recall that the scores have been set to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Thus, by multiplying the two scores together, we have a measure that assigns high scores to those individuals that are consistently liberal or conservative on both dimensions. Individuals that are liberal on one dimension and conservative on the other dimension will have a low, negative score. To account for moderates, we use the Consistency<sup>2</sup> measure because moderates fall in the middle of the consistency measure. By using all four of these variables (the issue scores and the Consistency and Consistency<sup>2</sup> measures), we are able to determine which ideological groups are most likely to change their identification.

The probit regression model of the CCAP data is presented in Table 1. In addition to the four issue variables, several other factors are controlled for in the model. We include dummy variables that indicate whether a respondent is a Female, is an African American (Black), or is another non-White race (Other Race). We also

**Table 1.** Probit Model of Change in Strength of Partisanship

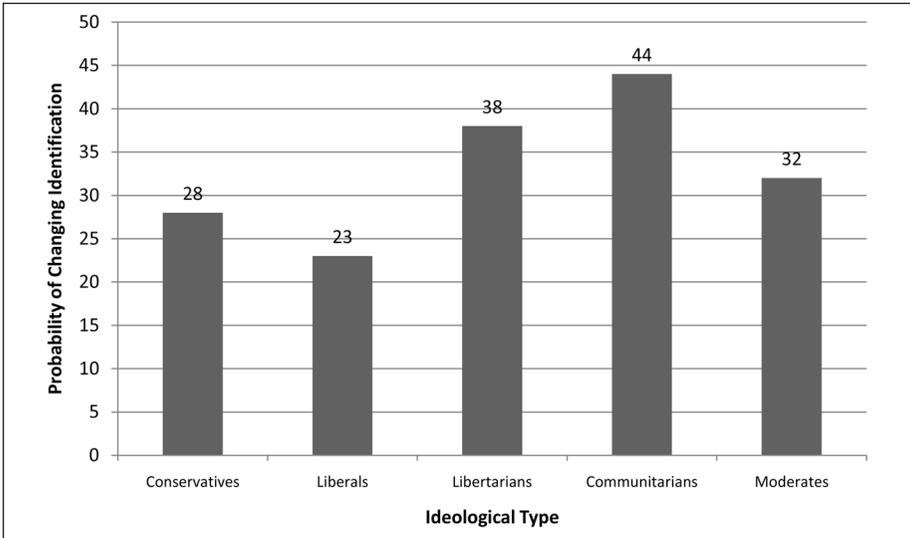
Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	<i>p</i>
Economic	0.000	0.048	0.997
Social	0.072	0.048	0.134
Consistency	-0.215	0.065	0.001
Consistency <sup>2</sup>	0.022	0.025	0.383
Change in personal finances	0.016	0.043	0.704
Education	-0.009	0.028	0.758
Age	-0.004	0.003	0.114
Female	0.059	0.079	0.457
Black	-0.171	0.151	0.258
Other race	-0.055	0.130	0.673
Constant	-0.285	0.239	0.233
<i>N</i>	1,276		

Note: Dependent variable is the change in partisan identification (1 = change, 0 = no change).

include variables to measure an individual's Age (in years) and level of Education (six-category variable). Finally, we included a measure of how an individual's personal financial situation has changed over the previous year. Change in Personal Finances is a subjective, retrospective evaluation measured on a 5-point scale ranging from *gotten much worse* to *gotten much better*.

If we examine the regression results in Table 1, we see that coefficient for the consistency variable is statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), whereas the coefficients for the other issue variables are not statistically significant. The coefficient on consistency is negative, which tells us that the more consistent an individual's positions on the two dimensions are, the less likely his or her partisan identification is to change. Thus, we see strong evidence that variability of party identification, even over a short time frame of 8 months, is significantly affected by the consistency of an individual's positions on the two dimensions.

The degree of these differences is illustrated in the bar chart presented in Figure 2, which presents the predicted probability of changing identification for five ideological types. Specifically, we calculated the predicted probability of an individual changing his or her identification for the five types of citizens we identified based on their positions on the two dimensions. A conservative is 1 standard deviation above the mean on both issue dimensions and liberal is 1 standard deviation below the mean on both dimensions. A communitarian is 1 standard deviation below the mean on the economic dimension and 1 standard deviation above the mean on the social dimension. A libertarian is 1 standard deviation above the mean on the economic dimension and 1 standard deviation below the mean on the social dimension. A moderate has the mean score on both dimensions. All other variables are set to their mean value when calculating the predicted probabilities.



**Figure 2.** Probability of a Change in Partisanship

As is clearly visible in Figure 2, the individuals that are most likely to change their identifications are libertarians and communitarians, whose probabilities of changing identification on the 7-point scale are 38% and 44%, respectively. The moderates' probability of changing partisan identification is 32%. By far, the least likely to change positions are the liberal (23% probability) and the conservative (28% probability) individuals. Highlighting the crucial importance of citizens' ideological fit within the framework of elite polarization, these results show that ideologically inconsistent individuals are the most likely to change identification, with ideologically consistent individuals the least likely to do so.

### *Change in the Strength of Partisanship*

The previous analysis of the change in partisanship focused on a short time period (8 months). In this section, we consider how and if citizens' partisan identification changed over a longer time period. The longer time period afforded by the ANES panel data combined with the changes in elite ideological polarization that occurred in these two periods allow us to analyze the direction in which individuals changed. Specifically, if individuals are adjusting their partisan identification in response to their perceptions of growing polarization between the parties, we expect to find that liberals and conservatives will become stronger in their identification, mirroring the growing divide between Democratic and Republican elites. Those individuals with ideologically inconsistent positions, the libertarians and communitarians, would adopt weaker partisan orientations as the party elites have polarized.

In addition to allowing us to examine the direction of change, the panel data have the added benefit that we can control for the possibility that individuals adjust their issue orientation as opposed to adjusting their partisanship. Specifically, we can use their issue positions at the beginning of the survey period to predict changes in their identification 4 years later. Thus, even if some individuals adjust their orientation on the issue dimensions over this period, this does not affect our analysis because we used the lagged values of their issue positions.

To investigate whether the change in partisanship reflects the growing polarization between elites, we take advantage of two of the panel studies conducted by the ANES. The first panel of surveys is from the 1992 to 1996 period and the second is from the 2000 to 2004 period. Both of these panels include three surveys conducted every 2 years. However, we ignore the middle, midterm election surveys (1994 and 2002, respectively) in each panel since there are fewer issue questions in those shorter surveys, which are necessary for accurately measuring individuals' positions on the economic and social dimensions. Thus, we focus on how an individual's partisanship has changed between 1992 and 1996 and between 2000 and 2004 depending on the consistency of their positions on the two policy dimensions.

Change in the strength in partisanship is measured by a three-category variable, where 0 indicates that the individual's partisanship remained unchanged over the 4-year period. If the individual's partisanship became stronger, the individual is assigned a score of 1, and if the individual's partisanship became weaker, a score of -1 is assigned. Since the dependent variable is an ordinal variable, the appropriate regression model is an ordered logit.

We use some of the same control variables used in the previous analysis, plus we add a couple of additional variables to the analysis. We use a measure of Trust, which indicates how trusting an individual is of the government generally. Trust is a scale ranging between 0 and 4, where higher numbers indicate the respondent is more trusting. The responses to the four survey questions are summed and averaged to create the scale. The other measure we include is political Knowledge. We anticipate that those individuals that do not follow politics consistently (and thus cannot recall basic facts about political events and actors) will be more uncertain about how their own attitudes match to party. Thus, as political knowledge increases, we expect that people will be less likely to change their partisanship. Our approach to measuring knowledge follows the guidelines suggested by Mondak (1999, 2001).

In Table 2, we present the results of the ordered regression model of the change in the strength of partisanship. The first set of results is for the 1992-1996 panel, and the second set of results is for the 2000-2004 panel. In the 1992-1996 panel, the coefficient for consistency is statistically significant at the  $p < 0.1$  level (two-tail test), and in the 2000-2004 panel, consistency is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level (two-tail test). This indicates that higher issue consistency contributes to stronger partisanship over time. That is, as voters' preferences on the two issue dimensions became more consistent over a 4-year period, either becoming more consistently liberal or more consistently conservative, their partisanship strengthened as well. Conversely, individuals

**Table 2.** Ordered Logit Model of Change in Strength of Partisanship

Independent Variable	1992-1996			2000-2004		
	Coefficient	Standard Error	<i>p</i>	Coefficient	Standard Error	<i>p</i>
Economic	0.061	0.059	0.294	-0.071	0.050	0.157
Social	-0.077	0.054	0.158	0.042	0.049	0.390
Consistency	0.104	0.063	0.097	0.114	0.049	0.019
Consistency <sup>2</sup>	-0.017	0.020	0.395	-0.009	0.016	0.587
Change in personal finances	0.078	0.045	0.081	0.016	0.041	0.694
Change in trust	0.141	0.207	0.495	0.010	0.119	0.935
Knowledge	-0.441	0.353	0.212	-0.786	0.335	0.019
Education	0.008	0.034	0.812	-0.001	0.032	0.986
Age	-0.002	0.003	0.389	-0.001	0.003	0.624
Female	-0.016	0.100	0.871	0.202	0.089	0.024
Black	-0.073	0.161	0.652	-0.157	0.184	0.393
Other race	0.016	0.155	0.916	0.041	0.152	0.787
tau-1	-1.255	0.284		-1.558	0.261	
tau-2	0.138	0.281		0.142	0.257	
<i>N</i>	584			759		

Note: Dependent variable is the change in strength of partisanship (-1 = less partisan, 0 = no change, 1 = more partisan).

became weaker partisans as the consistency between their preferences on the economic and social issue dimensions became less consistent in these 4-year periods.

As hypothesized, the analysis of the 2000-2004 panel shows that as knowledge increases, the likelihood of changing partisanship decreases. The coefficient for knowledge is negatively signed, but does not reach statistical significance for the 1992-1996 panel. One reason for this could be that this time period was one in which partisan elites were just beginning to provide consistent cues on the abortion issue; thus, more time may have been required for knowledgeable citizens to recognize this change and react accordingly (see Carmines et al., 2010). Finally, the female variable is significant and positively signed in the 2000-2004 analyses. More work needs to be done to examine whether this result is the consequence of women increasing their engagement in the political system, receiving more direct appeals from elites, or something else.

To get a sense of the effect of consistency on changes in the strength of partisanship, consider the predicted probabilities presented in Table 3. These probabilities are generated in the same manner as described in creating the probabilities for Figure 2. In both analyses, the individuals most likely to become stronger partisans are the conservative and liberals, as we would expect. Between 1992 and 1996, the most notable difference is with regards to the communitarians. During this 4-year period, the

**Table 3.** Probability of Change in the Strength of Partisanship

	Conservatives	Liberals	Libertarians	Communitarians	Moderates
	1992-1996				
Less partisan	17	16	16	27	19
No change	50	50	51	51	51
More partisan	33	34	31	22	30
	2000-2004				
Less partisan	12	11	19	14	14
No change	58	57	60	59	59
More partisan	30	32	20	27	27

communitarians are the most likely individuals to adopt a weaker partisan orientation. Whereas for every other group the likelihood of becoming a weaker partisan is less than 20%, for the communitarians the estimated probability is 27%. This change is reflective of the rightward shift on social issues embodied in the new Republican majority juxtaposed to the liberal orientation of the Clinton administration.

For the 2000-2004 panel, we witness a similar pattern except this time the group most likely to adopt a weaker partisan orientation is the libertarians. For the libertarians, the probability of becoming a weaker partisan is 5 to 8 percentage points higher than the other four groups. This change most likely reflects the strong emphasis on social issues embodied in the Bush administration.

In sum, in both of these analyses, the movement in partisanship reflects the positions and emphasis by the various partisan elites in the Congress and the presidency. While partisanship is a strong force that influences a wide range of attitudes and evaluations, clearly an individual's partisanship also reflects the larger political environment and it responds to changes in that environment. Specifically, the closer the fit between one's own views on the major issues of the day and the menu of issue positions offered by partisan elites, the more stable one's partisanship and the more likely one becomes a stronger partisan identifier over time.

### Conclusion

The American party system has undergone a fundamental transformation during the last several decades. From both an organizational and ideological standpoint, the two parties have become more distinct and less overlapping. Whatever remains of the liberal establishment clearly does not exert significant influence in the Republican Party, while old style conservative southern Democrats have vanished from the political scene and been replaced largely by new style conservative Southern Republicans. Moreover, the ideological differences between the parties now encompass the newer social issues as well as the older economic and social welfare issues. As both parties have become more ideologically unified, the ideological conflict between them has thus expanded to include virtually the entire domestic issue agenda.

Today party competition revolves around a Republican Party that has staked out distinctly conservative positions on economic and social issues opposing a Democratic Party that takes consistently liberal stands on economic and social issues.

How have ordinary Americans responded to this increased ideological polarization between party elites? A leading account suggests that, taking their cues from party elites, ordinary citizens have experienced a resurgent partisanship. According to this view, polarization among partisan elites “has produced a more partisan electorate” (Hetherington, 2001, p. 628). A dissenting view, however, suggests the opposite, that increased ideological purity among party elites has not resulted in a more partisan electorate. On the contrary, according to Fiorina (2005), “elite polarization is largely without foundation in a more polarized electorate” (p. 78).

Our evidence leads to a more qualified and nuanced conclusion. Elite polarization has indeed led to increased mass identification, our evidence suggests, but only among a segment of the public—those citizens holding consistently conservative or consistently liberal issue positions. During these last four decades, citizens with conservative preferences on both economic and social issues have become much more Republican in their partisan identifications while those with liberal positions on both issue dimensions have become more strongly identified with the Democratic Party. In other words, elite polarization has led to a more partisan citizenry among voters whose issue preferences match those of party elites. But the electorate is composed of many voters whose preferences on economic and social issues do not mirror those held by Republican and Democratic elites. The largest group of nonpolarized citizens is political moderates—voters with centrist preferences on both economic and social issues. Issue moderates cluster toward the middle of the partisan identification scale and have not become more Democratic or Republican over the last three decades.

Citizens with conflicting issue preferences, holding mainly liberal positions on one issue dimension but predominately conservative positions on the other issue dimension, have also not become more closely identified with either major party since the 1970s. Even as Republican and Democratic elites have become more ideologically polarized, communitarians and libertarians have not gravitated toward either party presumably because the issue package offered by both parties does not match their combination of issue preferences. Furthermore, our evidence indicates that communitarians and libertarians have become weaker partisans in responses to this growing polarization.

The unqualified generalization that elite polarization produces a more partisan electorate, then, falters on the ideological heterogeneity of the American electorate. It is an accurate description for a specific and limited segment of the electorate but is not valid for the entire public. The fact that liberals and conservatives in the electorate have responded to the increase in ideological polarization between party elites by becoming more partisan while moderates and the ideologically conflicted have not should be reassuring to those who question the competence and decision-making capability of the American electorate. For our results suggest that while voters do respond to elite cues, they do not do so blindly or irrationally but reasonably given their own political preferences and the political choices put before them.

## Appendix

To create the issue dimensions scores, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for each presidential-year survey from the ANES to attain scores for each respondent on the two issue dimensions. We identified issue questions in each survey that could be classified as either an economic or social issue ensuring that we had a sufficient number of issues for each dimension in each year, while trying to maintain consistency across years. The CFA model had two correlated dimensions. Table A1 lists the issue questions for each dimension in each year.

Given that the number of complete cases is significantly reduced when all the issue questions are used simultaneously, we opted to impute missing values before performing the CFA.<sup>5</sup> We created five data sets through multiple imputation (MI) and then performed the factor analysis to create the scores for each issue dimension.<sup>6</sup> As noted in the text of the article, scores have been standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. A high (i.e., positive) score indicates a conservative orientation and a low (i.e., negative) score indicates a liberal orientation.<sup>7</sup>

**Table A1.** Items Used to Create Economic and Social Issue Scores

Economic Issues	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008
7-Point Government Health Insurance Scale	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
7-Point Government Guaranteed Jobs Scale	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Does civil rights push too fast	X	X	X	X	X	X				
Government ensure school integration	X	X				X		X		
7-Point Busing Scale	X	X	X	X						
7-Point Aid to Blacks Scale	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Government ensure fair treatment in jobs	X				X	X	X	X		
Change in tax rates	X	X								
Does R favor segregation		X								
Government services			X							
7-Point Government Services/Spending Scale				X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Food stamps—federal spending				X	X	X	X	X		
Social Security—federal spending				X	X	X	X	X	X	
Assistance to Blacks—federal spending				X	X	X		X		

(continued)

## Appendix A1 (continued)

Economic Issues	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008
Government spending for Medicare				X						
Government spending for the unemployed				X	X	X				
Homeless—federal spending					X	X	X			
Racial preferences in hiring					X					
Racial quotas in college admissions					X	X				
Welfare programs—federal spending						X	X	X	X	
Poor—federal spending						X	X	X	X	
Affirmative action for hiring/promotion						X	X	X		
Support for affirmative action programs							X	X		
Child care—federal spending							X	X	X	
<b>Social Issues</b>										
7-Point Women's Equal Role Scale	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
When should abortion be allowed	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Legalize marijuana	X	X								
R favor/oppose Equal Rights Amendment		X	X							
Should prayer be allowed in schools			X	X	X	X	X			
Protect homosexuals from discrimination					X	X	X	X	X	X
Gays be allowed to serve in the military						X	X	X	X	X
Gays/lesbians be allowed to adopt						X		X	X	X
Parental consent for abortion						X		X		
Government funding for abortions						X			X	
Husband's consent for abortion						X				
Partial birth abortion								X	X	
Same-sex couples be allowed to marry									X	X

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## Notes

1. Carsey and Layman's (2006) account of conflict extension in the American electorate makes the case for a third dimension of issues focused on race. Kellstedt's (2003) research on racial policy mood, however, suggests that the racial issues dimension has "fused" onto the economic dimension over the past few decades.
2. We want to make clear that we make no normative claims about the terms *ideologically consistent* and *ideologically inconsistent*. We merely mean to elucidate which citizens have views consistent with what partisan elites are offering and which citizens do not.
3. While our focus is on individuals' issue preferences, our account is consistent with Levendusky (2009), who shows how self-identified liberals and conservatives sorted themselves into the Democratic and Republican Parties, respectively, over this same general time period.
4. See Hillygus and Shields (2008) for an empirical example of how candidates for office try to win support from cross-pressured voters in elections.
5. We could use a Full-Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) approach to handle the missing data, such as is used in Carsey and Layman (2006). However, we would still have to impute factor scores for the cases that have missing values on any of the indicators. More importantly, Schafer and Graham (2002) argue that doing imputation before the factor analysis is at least as good if not better than the FIML approach because the analyst can incorporate additional variables in the imputation model. The FIML approach only utilizes the information provided by the variables used in the factor-analytic model. Thus, we take advantage of this property, and in the imputation model, we utilize the independent variables in the regression models presented in Tables 1 through 3 as well as a respondent's ideological and partisan identification.
6. The multiple imputation procedure was performed in SAS Version 9.1. The PROC MI procedure was used with the MCMC algorithm and an uninformative Jeffery's prior. We used the default 200 burn-in iterations and the starting values were created using the Expected Maximization (EM) algorithm. This approach is based on the multivariate normality assumption advocated by King et al. (2001) but employs a different estimation technique.

7. It is worth noting that the correlation between the two issue dimensions never exceeds 0.5 in any survey. Thus, this suggests that there is a large proportion of the American public that does not fit into the traditional left-right continuum on both of these issue dimensions simultaneously. This is not surprising given that past research has found a lack of connection between issues and ideological identification, for example (Sniderman, 1993).

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## Bios

**Edward G. Carmines** is Warner O. Chapman Professor of Political Science and Rudy Professor at Indiana University, where he is also the Research Director at the Center on Congress and Director of the Center on American Politics. His teaching and research interests focus on American politics, especially elections, public opinion, and political psychology. He has published more than 75 articles and chapters in edited books as well as a half dozen books, including *Issue Evolution* (with James A. Stimson) and *Reaching Beyond Race* (with Paul M. Sniderman), both of which won the American Political Science Association's Gladys M. Kammerer Award for Best Book in the Field of U.S. National Policy. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

**Michael J. Ensley** is an associate professor of political science at Kent State University. His research interests include the U.S. Congress, elections, voting behavior, and statistical methodology.

**Michael W. Wagner** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He has published work related to questions of political behavior and political communication in several journals and book chapters. He has received grants from the National Science Foundation and the Dirksen Congressional Center, served as project director on the 2006 Congressional Election Study conducted by the Center on Congress at Indiana University, and was the 2012 Hazel R. McClymont Distinguished Faculty Fellow at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.