Two Parties Separated by a Common Language?

Daniel J. Coffey
Fellow, Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics
Associate Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Akron
dcoffey@uakron.edu

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Abstract

Based on analysis of party platforms written in 2012, I find that state political parties are highly polarized. At the same time, there is significant within and across party heterogeneity in issue positions. Finally, party platforms display meaningful differences in terms of how issues are justified. I argue that national party polarization is in part the result of critical differences in the underlying moral foundations that parties endorse and this is an inherent part of the federal nature of the American party system.
In an era of intense polarization, it is easy to look beyond the federal nature of the American party system. Regional differences, once enough to tear the nation in two and still strong enough to color accents and lifestyles, seem less important in the face of such intense polarization. Many studies that do focus on red and blue regions primarily focus on the geographic bastions each party maintains (Gelman et al. 2008; Cahn and Carbone 2010). Yet few studies have analyzed regional differences across and within state parties.

I present data here from a unique source, state party platforms, that helps to illuminate the nature of contemporary polarization. Federal systems are supposed to homogenize regional differences. Yet as many historical and anthropological studies show, U.S. regions remain culturally diverse, and this diversity may contribute to polarization as parties are unable to speak a common language. Many social psychologists have shown that parties, their candidates and supporters have fundamentally different moral views (Lakoff 2002; Westen 2008; Haidt 2012). I claim that differences in the moral outlook of the parties is exacerbated by the federal nature of the American party system. Federalism serves, at least in the American context, to diversify the issues on which parties take stands, as well as the moral foundation on which these positions appeal to local cultures. In short, polarization at the national level is driven by the diversity of viewpoints generated by a multi-regional political system. At the same time, nationally, two-party system hides this diversity of moral outlooks across and within parties.

My analysis finds that state party platforms vary across states and between parties in three important ways. First, ideological differences between parties are acute and persistent; the most liberal Republican platform is more conservative than the most conservative Democratic platform. Yet, the platforms display a nontrivial amount of intra-party ideological heterogeneity. Second, issue positions also vary across states and between parties. Much of this is due to geographic factors, driven by demographic and economic factors. Water rights and immigration, for example, matter a
great deal more to citizens in Arizona and Colorado than to citizens in New Jersey or Vermont. Yet, included in this variation, party platforms represent important and conscious choices about on which issues to take stands and on which issues to be silent. Finally, party platforms display meaningful differences in terms of language. Such differences are also partly geographic as words have different meanings across states and local dialects flavor the vocabulary of the platforms. It is important, however, to recognize that language choices are in some ways mirrors to the souls of the local parties, capturing critical differences in the underlying moral foundation of the state parties and their issue positions.

**Regional differences**

State political culture should differ because of several factors. The first is the existence of federalism. States in the U.S. have differed dramatically in their political development. Legal boundaries and guarantees of some constitutional autonomy have provided the conditions necessary for cultural development. Secondly, migration patterns have differed. Economic development also has proceeded along regional lines, attracting different types and concentrations of people. In turn, these factors have led to the creation of different societies and expectations about government, social norms and even different dialects.

In state politics, scholars have developed numerous cultural typologies to explain cross-sectional differences in state politics and policies. One of the more prominent is Daniel Elazar’s (1968) trichotomy of political cultures (moralist, individualist, and traditionalist), which remains the single most cited and perhaps compelling scheme of inter and intra-state divisions. More recently, Lieske (2012) has found evidence that has identified eleven distinct state sub-cultures, which he finds, form a continuum that reduces to unidimensional measure that correlates Elazar’s, while Woodward (2012) identified 12 separate “nations” that pre-date the creation of American
government and continue to drive differences that extend well beyond government. This is in addition to the infamous “red-state, blue-state divide” that is often used to explain regional ideological differences (Brooks 2000; Fiorina and Pope 2005; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Gelman et al 2008). In fact, a recent study found that basic personality differences exist across states (Rentfrow et al 2013).

Over time, however, parties, once prisoners to their regional nature (Milkis 1993; Ceaser 1979) have become much more national in orientation, with congressional parties fundraising and developing national messages each midterm election (Aldrich 2012). Measures of party voting in Congress find few remaining Blue dog Democrats or liberal Republicans (McCarty Poole, Rosenthal and 2006). Political polarization, then, would seem to subsume historical and culturally important regional differences within parties. In fact, between-party polarization has been shown to exist across states and regions measured at the elite and mass level (Weinberg, 2010; Abramowitz 2011; Brace et al. 2007). Thus, nationally polarized parties predict small within-party ideological heterogeneity.

Regional Differences in Moral Beliefs

In the American context, political polarization often assumes that ideological conflict is largely between liberalism and conservatism. Indeed, most studies of public opinion and political elites find that disparate issues from taxes to abortion to environmentalism and war can be neatly captured by a single ideological continuum (McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal and 2006; Abramowitz 2010).

There is considerable research in political science and social psychology that the underlying reasons for the attraction to these polar ends is rooted in both biological and psychological factors.
Recently Haidt (2012) has shown that differences in party ideology are partially rooted in moral intuitions. Haidt provides compelling evidence that five “taste buds” make up the foundations for nearly all moral beliefs. These foundations are 1) care/harm, 2) fairness/cheating, 3) loyalty/betrayal, 4) authority/subversion and 5) sanctity/degradation. While not all researchers accept the specific five foundations, considerable research suggests that the liberal-conservative polarization most likely masks a multidimensional foundation, whether this is rooted in genetics, culture, personality or socio-economics, or some combination of these factors (Carney et al 2009; Mondack; 2010; Hetherington and Weiler 2009).

Haidt’s research is consistent with a view the moral foundations vary over time and space. That is while the foundations have evolutionary roots in how these judgments equipped our ancestors to survive a hostile word, humans also adapt to changing environments and both time and place, Haidt finds, alter the use of the foundations depending on circumstances. Westerners, for example, are far more likely to endorse the foundations of fairness and care than those of sanctity, authority and loyalty, which are more commonly linked with morality among non-Westerners (see Henrich J, Heine SJ, Norenzayan 2010).

Thus polarization would be expected to be consistent with regional differences in moral language or foundations. Issues such as gun control can simultaneously tap into beliefs about freedom, safety from criminals, and protection of the young from violence. Environmentalism captures intuitive feelings about protecting citizens from pollution, preserving the sanctity of natural habitats as well as the freedom of individuals and corporations to use private property without government interference. Indeed, Layman and Carsey (2002) found, in a comprehensive study of party activists, that the number of issues on which activists are polarized has expanded over time. In contrast to realignment theory which generally predicts that a single dominant cleavage will separate

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1 Haidt provides some evidence that there may in fact be six foundations, including a liberty/freedom foundation.
each party, Layman and Carsey’s findings show that New Deal, racial as well as religious and cultural issues separate party activists with new issues being added instead of replacing old alignments.

Given the deep roots of America’s regional differences, it would be expected that regional differences would exist not just in ideology or even in the issues on which parties take stands, but also in the moral underpinnings of these issues. A conservative born and raised on the densely populated East Coast may place themself on the same position on an NES item about environmental or health care spending than a conservative raised in the rural Rocky Mountains. This, however, tells us little about either individual’s conceptualization of the issue at stake. I suggest, then, that individual issues can provoke polarization even while citizens and their elected officials possess different underlying beliefs about that the issues are “about.”

Data and Methods

Problematically, however, most national surveys are not designed to probe respondents’ moral beliefs. For the sake of generalizability, most scales are developed using survey items with common response options (such as “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”). From a research perspective, it is quite difficult to find comparable sources that articulate political beliefs across states.

One untapped resource are state political party platforms. Not all state parties write platforms; in the mid-Atlantic and most Southern states, there is not a tradition of writing platforms, while platforms are most frequently found in the upper-Midwestern states. In previous studies, I found that the state parties most often write platforms in Moralist states with well-organized parties and those states that score high on Putnam’s (2000) social capital index (Coffey 2006). State party platforms vary considerably in length and issue content and often serve as battlegrounds for factions within the state parties. As a result, some state parties produce platforms inconsistently.
Nevertheless, the platforms are ideal for the current study for several reasons. In contrast, party platforms express a party’s essential principles, and most state parties have their platforms on their websites. While the length and the content of the platforms vary from state to state, platforms are each state party’s opportunity to define the key issues of debate in the state and to make clear their positions on those issues. The platforms are important statements of the organization, whether they are put together by the state party central committee or written by activists at the precinct level. A key benefit of analyzing state parties is that variance in political conditions across the states means that several hypotheses about how well parties represent citizens can tested. As a result, the external validity of the research design is protected. I do not claim that the platforms represent the single view of an entire state party. Indeed, part of the value of studying these platforms is that they are windows into not only the core values of the parties, but the conflicts and tensions that exist within and across state parties.

Analyses of political texts can provide important insights into the meaning of partisan and ideological differences. Previously impossible research questions that required the analysis of political texts containing hundreds or even thousands of words can now be coded in time periods of seconds (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). Human coding, in contrast, in labor-intensive and suffers from persist reliability concerns.

Most computer-assisted-text-analysis (CATA) programs use algorithms that break texts into individual words. Programs then largely make decisions based on the frequency of words in one text relative to either reference texts or other texts in the sample (see Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Martin and Vanberg 2008; Benoit and Laver 2008; Kidd 2008). Researchers have been successfully applying text analysis software (along with expert, human coding) for years to place European ideological position parties based on their manifestos (Laver, Michael, Kenneth Benoit, and John Garry 2003; Lowe, Benoit, Mihaylov, and Laver. 2011). Text mining or analysis software is
frequently used to identify meaningful patterns in speeches, legislative debates and media coverage (Young and Soroka 2011; Grimmer 2010; Weinberg 2010). The applications of automated systems are numerous. Hart, Childers and Lind (2013), for example, applied DICTION to campaign speeches and found four main differences in party tone: Restoration (Republican) vs. Reform (Democratic), Utility (Democratic) vs. Value (Republicans), Community (Democrats) vs. Independence (Republicans) and Populism (Democratic) vs. Nationalism (Republican).

While the advantages of computer-based coding are clear, I have chosen to manually code the platforms for several reasons. While considerable advances have been made in recent years, most CATA are designed for narrow purposes. Programs often are good at serving a particular purpose; DICTION is good at identifying the tone of a text, Wordscores and Wordfish are designed to identify the relative ideology of a text compared to other texts in a sample. As Klipperdorft notes, however, “Humans cannot help but render texts meaningful while reading, and they may not always do so reliably. The reliability that computer analysis offers, in contrast, lies in the process of character string manipulation, which is far removed from what humans do when interpreting text” (2012: 210).

Currently, there are no CATA programs available for categorizing political texts into simple issue categories that readers of would easily recognize. A statement along the lines that “we believe these rights should be protected” can be easily found in both Republican and Democratic platforms, applied to a dizzying array of different issues. Algorithms generally are designed using word counts, yet such studies are limited in terms of semantic validity, or the preservation of the meaning of a text to a reader in the process of coding. Many issues are inherently multidimensional and while scaling techniques can establish linkages between issues, few issues are neatly condensed. As Grimmer and Stewart point out, “the complexity of language implies that automated content analysis methods will never replace careful and close reading of texts” and that automated programs are “best thought of
as amplifying and augmenting careful reading and thoughtful analysis” (2013: 268). Thus, the data set that I have created can be used as a baseline for other researchers exploring more specific questions about state party ideology. Providing a human benchmark is essential and does not preempt the future use of human algorithms (Lowe and Beniot and 2013).

Data and Methods

The dataset for the current study are the 67 state party platforms written in 2010 and 2012. The platforms are usually available on party websites. Using 67 platforms produces codes for 9,791 individual sentences and over 200,000 individual words. As a result, this is a rich data set for future studies into the development of ideological beliefs across states or how issue arises into the political agenda.

For each platform, the sentence was the unit of analysis, with each sentence coded by into one of five ideological categories and into one of 25 issue categories. I have previously shown that state party platforms written from 2000 to 2004 are highly polarized (Coffey 2007; 2011). For this study, I applied a similar coding procedure, although in this case I have employed a more nuanced five-point scale such that each sentence was coded as either very conservative (-1), conservative (-.5), moderate (0), liberal (.5) and very liberal (1). By measuring ideology in this manner, a standardized value can be assigned to each category, ranging from 1 (all liberal sentences) to –1 (all conservative sentences). I used two basic guidelines to classify sentences: (1) Would such a sentence appear in the opposition party’s platform? and (2) How would a reasonable person interpret such a sentence? I have previously shown the validity of this coding scheme (Coffey 2005, 2007, 2011).

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2 State parties often write platforms during midterm election years. For the sake of consistency, I have used the most recent platform for each state party. In most cases, this was 2012, but about one-thirds of the platforms were written in 2010.

3 The full dataset of platforms includes over 250 platforms written between 2000 and 2012.
The platforms clearly distinguish the parties across the states. The Democratic average score is a fairly liberal .63, while the average GOP platform is −.68. In fact, there is no overlap between the parties: Indiana’s 2012 Republican platform, which is the most liberal GOP platform, has a score of −.30, while the 2012 Wyoming Democratic platform, which is the most conservative Democratic platform, has a score of .42. Figure 1 provides stark evidence of the parties’ polarization.

Regional variation occurs, but only slightly. As shown in Figure 2, with the platforms broken into four regions, the ideological variation is modest and with small sample sizes, it is difficult to generalize that any particular region stands out. In both cases, Southern parties (.62) are more conservative, Eastern parties (.66) and Midwestern (.70) parties are close to the party mean, while only Western (.74) are significantly more liberal. While the sample sizes are small, these differences are persistent from 2000 to 2012. In the case of the GOP, Eastern parties (−.59) are significantly more liberal, Southern parties (−.72) are significantly more conservative, while Midwestern parties (.61) and Western (.64) are indistinguishable from the party average. While it is the case that different regional differences might reveal sharper distinctions (Upper Midwestern parties are generally quite polarized while industrial and Midwestern parties are more moderate), these divisions provide evidence that regional variations among state parties occur, but they are not immediately evident in terms of ideology.

Party Issue Diversity

State parties vary considerably in the types of issues that they emphasize. I coded platform sentences into 25 separate subcategories were used for the content analysis. The use of

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4 The issues were budget, economic development, social welfare, health care, public works, veterans, law and order, general principles, immigration, civil rights, civil liberties, gay rights, abortion, gender, education, environment, federalism, campaign finance, terrorism, national defense, partisanship, illegal drugs, voting, and open government.
subcategories allows for the detection of differences in the content of ideological debate across states with different political cultures and demographics, which a single right-left dimension will not capture, for reasons noted above. This provides a valid indicator of party issue priorities across states. This results in a measure of attention for each issue. The percentage of attention for each issue was measured as simply the number of sentences for each category divided by the total number of sentences. While it was noted above that many political issues tap into multiple considerations for the sake of consistency sentences were broadly placed into a single category each.

The issue content reveals consistent differences as shown in Figure 3. The figure show the difference between the mean Democratic percentages devoted to the issues and the mean Republican percentage. For example, Democratic parties on average devoted 8.6 percent of platform sentences to health care, neatly three times more than the Republican average of 3.4 percent. Democrats were significantly more likely to address social welfare, health care, education, civil rights, environmental issues and issues of open government, while Republicans were more likely to address taxes, economic development, and gun rights/control, immigration and abortion.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Parties did not totally avoid these issues, instead, parties tended to place different emphasis on the issues in terms of prominence. For example, while nearly all Democratic platforms addressed health care, five states devoted only a few sentences to these issues. On balance, most Democratic platforms avoided more than a sentence or two to abortion, gay marriage, or gun control, but several state Democratic platforms had lengthy sections on these issues. While most Republican platforms addressed abortion, a few avoided the issues all together.

Using an admittedly crude distinction between issues, I combined issues into two main categories, economic and cultural issues. The economic category was created by combining all sentences on budget, economic development, social welfare, health care, public works, veterans, and
education. The cultural issues category was created by combining all sentences on general principals, law and order, civil rights and liberties, immigration, abortion, gender, gay rights, and the environment.

INSERT FIGURES 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE

The analysis produces some predictable findings (see Figures 4-5). For example, overall, state Republican parties were more likely to devote attention to social-cultural issues. These issues generally represent the views of Republican Party activists. In nearly every region except the Western U.S., Republican parties were more likely to address these issues compared to state Democratic parties. Democrats were more likely to economic issues, in nearly every region except the eastern U.S. This is consistent with the historical advantage Democrats have had on these issues.

The regional variations make sense as well. Generally, cultural issues have tended to dominate discussion in the West, with historically less professionalized state governments and a smaller industrial economic base. Sometimes referred to as “post-material” issues, both Republican and Democratic Western parties were more likely to address environmental issues, civil liberties as well as foreign policy (which was not included in the cultural issues category). Eastern and Southern parties were especially likely to address economic issues. The Midwest, interestingly, tended to see very polarized parties, with Republicans significantly more likely to address cultural issues and Democratic parties more likely to address economic issues.

Importantly, there was considerable variation across state parties and issues. Some of this owes to the nature of how the platforms are written. Longer platforms addressed more issues. In states in which platforms are written by drawing from citizen-written planks at spring caucuses, platforms tended to address more issues and more contentious issues. This was particularly true in the Upper-Midwestern and Western state parties.
In sum, however, even in a polarized political system, there is considerable within-party as well as regional issue heterogeneity. This provides some affirmation for the claim that when issues are aggregated to the national level, national parties will be ideologically polarized across numerous issues. Instead of narrowing the number of issues, federalism increases the number of issues national parties will address and therefore contributes to overall ideological polarization. State parties do not address every issue, but in general, when they do, their positions are quite far from the median. National parties, then, are not pressured by their state affiliates to find a common ground within the party. Instead, as the national platforms show, to satisfy state party activist, national parties must take ideologically polarized stands on nearly all issues. This is a strong research claim and the data in this analysis can only provide a hint about this hypothesis.

Diversity of Meaning

Finally, a qualitative review of state platforms reveals an impressive diversity of views about how issues are interpreted. For example, both parties addressed veterans issues, the environment and education frequently. Yet, consistent with Haidt’s theory, the moral tone of the positions varied considerably across parties. For example, state Democratic parties were likely to articulate a belief that veterans, due to their sacrifices, deserved the care of the state and federal government upon their return home. Nearly all statements focused on providing health care benefits for returning veterans. In the Iowa Democratic platform, for example, the party calls for “increased professional staffing for all Veterans Affair Medical Centers (VANES) and Outreach Centers accommodating the extensive need for Doctors, Dentists, Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Family Counselors and Social Workers.” In contrast, Republican state parties tended to emphasize focus more on loyalty and respect. The Arizona Republican platforms, stresses the need for veterans to be respected: the party pledges to honor “the tremendous accomplishments and sacrifices of Arizona’s 700,000
veterans who are responsible for defending our nation in countless wars and military actions, and for securing our freedoms for much of the past century. We pledge to them our service and our voice, and our promise that their great deeds shall never be forgotten.”

In general Haidt’s five moral foundations apply well to state party platforms. Democrats, particularly when they emphasized education and health care, tended to focus primarily making sure that all citizens have equal access to the same services and the link between this equality and the overall health of the democracy. A common Democratic statement on education, for example, can be found in the Oregon Democratic platform: “We support accommodation of the needs of the diverse populations served by our public education system.” In contrast, Republicans were more likely to stress concepts dealing with freedom and choice; the South Carolina Republicans, for example, stress that The Republican Party of South Carolina believes that the “general welfare” is significantly promoted when all are provided an opportunity to receive an education commensurate with their individual abilities.”

Yet, there was also considerable intra-party diversity of meaning as well. Western Democratic parties were more likely to address environmental issues from the perspective of protecting the sanctity of the environment as an end in itself. The Wyoming Democratic states, “Wyoming Democrats support the protection of Wyoming’s wildlife, biological diversity and natural resources and maintenance of public access to public lands in ways that preserve the integrity of those lands.” In contrast, Eastern and Midwestern tended to emphasize the need to protect humans from pollution. The New Hampshire Democratic platform states, “We support policies that protect land we can cultivate, water we can drink, air we can breathe, and streams we can fish, and that

5 Interestingly, there was considerable opposition in both parties to the adoption of “Common Core” standards; this is perhaps due to the historic nature of education as a state or even locally-run system.
address the threat of climate change and pollution.” Republican platforms did not always offer the same reasons for supporting the Second Amendment; in many states, the right to bear arms was seen as part of self-defense, but in several other platforms, the right was seen more as a Constitutional right to be protected against government interference. These patterns require greater empirical scrutiny, but it was apparent from a manual reading of each platform that the parties draw upon a diverse set of moral foundations to justify the positions of their parties.

Conclusion

Importantly, party platforms represent the principals of each party quite well. While American continue to express frustration with the sound bit nature of politics in the media, it is important to note that parties do have meaningful differences on issues and principles. State party platforms, admittedly obscure documents, provide a window into the core values of both elected officials and the citizens they represent. While the platforms express polarized views, a review of the platforms reveals that state parties have a genuine concern with the well-being of their state and nation. One sees few examples of the uncivil or often sophomoric discourse that characterizes cable “debate” on television news.

Perhaps just as important, the federal nature of the party system allows parties to represent their citizens by allowing parties to take nuanced stands on issues and to decide which issues matter most to their citizens. The analysis shows clear evidence of within-party variance in terms of ideology and issue positions. Some of these differences are predictable, such as Southern parties being more conservative than Eastern parties, but state-to-state variance is relatively high, even within regions. Moreover, state party platforms provide a rare chance to analyze how parties articulate their differences. The platforms show that parties and their citizens draw upon different cultural interpretations of the issues and the platforms succinctly capture this diversity of meaning.
Finally, the development of a comprehensive dataset of state party platforms provides a valuable resource for researchers of party and state politics. While the data set is limited by the fact that not all state parties write platforms, a number of questions about state and regional party politics can be explored by analyzing state party platforms. Indeed, many issues that motivate party position changes begin at the state level and evidence of shifting positions can be found by looking closely at state party platforms (Coffey 2006). Researchers using automated methods have at their disposal a dataset of nearly 250 documents and one million words in just the last decade and the platforms are rewritten every two years in some states. In our field, we stand to learn a great deal about the party system by using this long-neglected resource.
Works Cited


Figure 1: State Party Ideology

Mean State Party Ideology Score 2012
Figure 2: Regional Differences in State Party Ideology
Figure 3: Mean Difference in Issue Attention
Figure 4: Platform Cultural Attention by Region
Figure 5: Platform Cultural Attention by Region