

The Growing Polarization of American Voters

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## Introduction

When Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast in late August, it left in its wake several challenges for government at the local, state, and national levels. However, it only took a few days for people to form opinions about the government's response to the crisis, and those opinions split along predictable partisan lines. A Washington-Post ABC News poll conducted Friday, September 2, 2005 (just four days after the hurricane) found that 74 percent of Republicans approved of the way President Bush was handling the crisis, while only 17 percent of Democrats approved (Balz 2005). The partisan divisions do not appear to have dissipated. A CBS/New York Times poll conducted September 9-13 found that 74 percent of Republicans approved of the way President Bush handled the response to Hurricane Katrina, while only 22 percent of Democrats approved.<sup>1</sup> The partisan public response to a natural disaster is further evidence of political polarization in the United States.

The surge in party polarization in the United States has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years. There is clear evidence of a growing influence of party and ideology on voting behavior during the last twenty years (Miller 1991; Bartels 2000; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, 2005; Jacobson 2003; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003). As party loyalty among voters has increased, rates of split-ticket voting have decreased. Figure 1 shows the percentage of split congressional districts (i.e., districts carried by a presidential candidate of one party and a House candidate of another party), the percentage of split Senate delegations, and the percentage of major-party president-House ticket splitters going back to 1900. The same trends are evident from all three measures: ticket splitting began increasing in the 1950s, peaked around 1980, and

then declined substantially. The 2004 election produced the lowest levels of ticket splitting seen since the 1950s and 1960s.

[Figure 1 about here]

In this paper we measure party polarization by examining responses to feeling thermometer ratings of political parties and presidential candidates collected in NES surveys. Using these measures, we find that the 2004 election stands out as the most polarized campaign since NES began using feeling thermometers in 1964. In comparing levels of polarization among different groups of people, we find evidence consistent with the theory that increasing party polarization in the United States is an elite-driven development.

### Searching for Political Polarization

A current subject of debate is whether the resurgent partisanship in the United States is a result of elite polarization alone or mass-level polarization too. There is clear evidence of polarization at the elite level. For example, roll call studies indicate that Republican members of Congress have become more unified and more conservative during the last thirty years, while the Democrats in Congress have become more uniformly liberal (Rohde 1991; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Similarly, the issue distance between Republican and Democratic party activists on social and economic issues has grown during the same period (Layman 2001; Wolbrecht 2002; Layman, et al. 2005).

At the same time, there is some disagreement about whether polarization has also taken place in the mass public. The debate focuses on whether there is a “culture war” in the United States, often referring to the red state/blue state dichotomy commonly used by journalists and pundits (Hunter 1994; Green *et al.* 1996; Williams 1997; Layman 2001; Frank 2004; Fiorina 2005; Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder 2005). Much of the scholarly debate has examined whether different groups have moved farther apart in their positions on particular issues. Some argue that most Americans are still moderates on a host of economic and cultural issues (Fiorina 2005; Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2005). Thus, the increased partisanship in voting is simply the result of moderate voters having to choose between more extreme candidates than in the past. In addition, Fiorina (2005) argues that partisan, geographical, and social cleavages on many issues have not grown much over time, and actually have diminished on some issues. Some other studies of public opinion tend to support Fiorina’s claim that Americans have not moved further apart on many issues (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Evans 2003; Mouw and Sobel 2001). On the other hand, several studies find growing issue distances between Democrats and Republicans on several types of issues (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Layman 2001; Fleisher and Bond 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002; Evans 2003). Part of the debate between Fiorina and others is whether Democrats and Republicans have moved *substantially* further apart in their issue positions (Fiorina 2005: 25-32).

Furthermore, other studies find a growing gap between Republicans and Democrats in terms of ideological identification, with Republicans becoming more conservative and Democrats becoming more liberal over time (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Jacobson 2000). Still others find growing party differences in public evaluations of

parties, candidates, and government institutions (Fleisher and Bond 2001; Hetherington 2001; Jacobson 2003; Kimball 2005).

While studies of the issue distance between partisans are important, they may miss a psychological aspect of polarization. Political polarization is more than just holding different positions on hot-button issues. Polarization is also accompanied by an “us versus them” mentality, in which partisanship shapes the way people see the political world. As stated in *The American Voter*, “Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (Campbell *et al.* 1960: 133). This is consistent with longstanding research emphasizing the importance of group perceptions party identification and mass political behavior (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954: 77-86).

Thus, partisans are motivated to perceive events and even facts in ways that support their party (Fischle 2000; Bartels 2002). One could examine the ideological placement items in NES surveys to find an example. In the 2004 NES survey, the mean placement of the Democratic party on the seven-point ideology scale is 3.0 (slightly liberal). However, the mean placement of the Democratic party by Democrats is 3.4 (between slightly liberal and middle-of-the-road), while the mean placement of the Democratic party by Republicans is 2.4 (between slightly liberal and liberal). Thus, to mainly consider a respondent’s self-placement on issue or ideological scales may miss some degree to which people exaggerate group differences, and thus miss an important aspect of polarization.

Another way to consider the psychological side of partisan polarization is by applying social identity theory, which holds that partisans are motivated to praise their

own group, denigrate the opposing group, and exaggerate inter-group differences (Tajfel and Turner 1986). One finding of social identity theory is that people tend to believe there are greater differences between groups than actually exists (Tajfel and Turner 1986). This has a ready application to American politics. Despite studies indicating that most citizens hold moderate positions, and that rank-and-file partisans may not be very far apart on many issues, voters may still see their party as good and the other party as bad. Greene (2004) has applied social identity theory to partisanship in the United States and finds that measures of partisan social identity are strongly correlated with evaluations of the parties. Bolce and De Maio (1999) imply a similar in-group versus out-group perspective in their study of attitudes toward Christian fundamentalists.

Thus, we measure polarization by the correlation between the party and candidate feeling thermometer ratings in National Election Study surveys. Thermometer scales ask respondents to rate an object on a scale ranging from 0 (indicating very cold feelings toward the person or group) to 100 (indicating very warm feelings). Measuring the correlation between thermometer ratings of the Democratic party and thermometer ratings of the Republican party, for example, captures the “us versus them” mindset that is an important feature of polarization. In a highly polarized citizenry, we would expect a strong negative correlation between the two party thermometer ratings and between the two presidential candidate thermometer ratings, as people rate their own party positively while rating the other party negatively. In a non-polarized citizenry, one might expect no correlation. Finding a negative correlation between different objects on feeling thermometer ratings is hindered by a “response-set bias”, a tendency for survey respondents to give similar ratings to all groups (Green 1988; Wilcox, Sigelman, and

Cook 1989; Weisberg, Haynes, and Krosnick 1995). Thus, correlations between thermometer ratings provide conservative estimates of levels of party polarization.

Many other studies have used thermometer ratings to measure attitudes toward political parties and candidates (e.g., Wattenberg 1998; Bolce and De Maio 1999; Hetherington 2001; Fleisher and Bond 2001; Greene 2004; Fiorina 2005). These studies tend to compare mean thermometer ratings of the same object by different groups of respondents, or they compare the number of group respondents rating a political object positively (above 50) versus the number rating the object negatively (below 50). To our knowledge, Weisberg's studies of presidential elections are the reports of correlations between thermometer ratings that we describe above (e.g., Weisberg and Hill 2004; Weisberg and Kimball 1995). In the following section, we use the correlation measure to see whether party polarization has increased in recent elections. Then, we apply the measure to the 2004 election more closely to see which segments of the public are most polarized.

### Trends in Party Polarization

We first examine correlations between thermometer ratings of political parties and presidential candidates in elections since 1964, when NES introduced the thermometer questions (see Table 1). The results suggest that party polarization reached new heights in 2004. The 2004 election produces the strongest negative correlation between party and presidential candidate thermometer ratings in the time series. In comparing presidential elections over time, we do not find evidence of a secular increase in party polarization.

Polarization increased after the 1970s but then remained fairly level until rising sharply in 2004.

Wattenberg (1998: 158-162) argues that Americans have become more polarized in evaluations of specific political figures (especially President Reagan) but not in evaluations of political parties. The evidence here tends to suggest otherwise. The elections of 1972 and 1976 (featuring no correlation between party thermometers and negative correlations between candidate thermometers) supports Wattenberg's thesis, and correlations between candidate thermometer ratings are usually stronger than correlations between party thermometer ratings.<sup>2</sup> However, each election since 1980 shows fairly reliable polarization between the two parties. In addition, other presidential candidates after Reagan generated similar levels of polarization. One might also conclude that President George W. Bush is a more polarizing political figure than President Reagan was.

[Table 1 here]

A by-product of increasing party polarization in the United States is more intense feelings about presidential campaigns. Figure 2 provides more evidence that the 2004 election stands out as one of the most intensely contested campaigns in recent history. The trends lines in Figure 2 indicate growing campaign intensity over time. In 2004, 85 percent of NES respondents said they care a good deal who wins the presidential election, the highest percentage recorded since NES began asking the question in 1952. Similarly, the 2004 election produced the highest percentage of respondents who see important



differences between the parties (76%) – the second highest figure was recorded in 2000 (64%). While not picture in Figure 2, the 2004 election also produced the highest percentage of NES respondents who participated in campaign activities (Abramowitz and Saunders 2005). Finally, a relatively large portion of voters made up their minds early in the 2004 campaign. In 2004, only 30% of NES respondents reported making their presidential voting decision after the national party conventions. This is tied for the lowest such percentage recorded by NES except for the Eisenhower-Stevenson rematch in 1956.

[Figure 2 here]

### Who are the Most Polarized People?

We next take a closer look at the 2004 election to find groups most likely to see the political world in a polarized fashion. We hypothesize that party polarization in the United States is largely an elite-driven phenomenon. The growing ideological distance between parties at the elite level has increased the salience of party labels and ideological considerations when citizens evaluate politicians and make voting decisions. As political parties at the national level have become more unified in ideologically-driven disputes, the public comes to see politics in more partisan terms (Kimball 2004; Burden and Kimball 2002). Thus, we expect to find the most polarization among citizens who are most attentive and committed to the elite party agenda.

[Table 2 here]

We first examine party polarization by strength of partisan political commitment (see Table 2). As expected, strength of partisanship is fairly strongly associated with levels of party polarization. Strong partisans are much more polarized in their evaluations of the parties and candidates than weak partisans and independents. In addition, partisans active in campaigning are more polarized than the rest of the electorate.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, those who care about the presidential election are substantially more polarized than politically apathetic citizens. This is consistent with a theory of party polarization as an elite-driven phenomenon. However, it is worth noting the sizeable numbers of people in the elite categories of Table 2. In 2004, one-third of the NES respondents were strong partisans, while only ten percent were pure independents. Similarly, twenty-two percent engaged in high levels of campaign activity (two or more activities). Thus, the strongest and most active partisans are not exactly a thin slice of the electorate.

[Table 3 here]

We also examine other political activity (see Table 3) to compare to overtly partisan activity. Again, we see that people who work with others in their community or are members of an organization are more polarized in their views of the parties and presidential candidates than non-participants. However, the differences are fairly mild.

Thus, it is partisan activity rather than political activity per se that is the strongest predictor of polarization.

[Table 4 here]

In addition to the importance of political activity, we also expect political awareness to be a predictor of party polarization. We test this hypothesis by examining three measures of attention to politics (see Table 4). As expected, we find support for the hypothesis. Party polarization is more severe among the highly knowledgeable and highly interested segments of the public.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, people who see important differences between the parties are more polarized than those who see no differences. The party differences measure is more closely associated with polarized evaluations of the parties than of the presidential candidates.

[Table 5 here]

Next we examine whether mobilization efforts by political parties and other groups may be associated with increased polarization (see Table 5). Those who are contacted by one of the political parties indeed are more polarized than those who avoid party contact (particularly in their evaluations of the two parties). This is significant because forty-five percent of NES respondents in 2004 reported being contacted by a political party, up substantially from previous years. For example, only twenty percent reported party contact in 1992. Labor unions are another mobilizing force in American

politics. However, we find fairly similar levels of party polarization among union and non-union households.

[Table 6 here]

We also examine media sources, particularly new forms of media, as a predictor of polarization in the United States (see Table 6). Some scholars see the Internet as a polarizing force in American democracy because of the user's ability to filter out opposing views (Sunstein 2001; Bimber and Davis 2003). Others suggest that talk radio may be a source of political persuasion (Barker 2002), and may polarize the public due to the red-meat content of some talk radio programs. Indeed, we find higher levels of polarization among people who listen to political talk radio and get campaign information from the Internet. However, this may be a result of self-selective attention to politics among Internet users and talk radio listeners, because we also find somewhat higher levels of polarization among people who get campaign news from newspapers and from television, two staples of the old mainstream media.

[Table 7 here]

We also examine individual cognitive dispositions as a source of political polarization. Cacioppo and Petty (1982) hypothesize that a psychological "need for cognition" shapes how people respond to persuasive messages. People high in need for

cognition are more likely to consider both pro and con arguments in response to a persuasive communication, and will make a decision based on a more thoughtful consideration of the content of the message. In contrast, people low in need for cognition are more likely to respond to persuasive messages by following decision-making shortcuts, such as the party affiliation of the messenger. Thus, we might expect lower levels of party polarization among people high in need for cognition. The 2004 NES survey included two items measuring need for cognition (see Table 7). Overall, the results suggest that party polarization is not much a function of need for cognition. The only result consistent with the hypothesis is that we find more polarized views of the political parties among people who dislike responsibility for situations that require thinking.

[Table 8 here]

Finally, we examine several demographic correlates of party polarization in 2004 (see Table 8). We briefly examine the familiar Red state/Blue state divide. We find little difference in party polarization between red and blue states. In addition, the party polarization was no higher in the battleground states of the 2004 presidential election than in the non-competitive states.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, there does not appear to be a strong regional basis for party polarization in the United States. In terms of other demographic variables, we find somewhat higher levels of party polarization among women, whites, upper income earners, elderly citizens, and married people. Most of the demographic differences in party polarization are not as strong as those associated with political

awareness and activity. Indeed, several of the demographic measures, such as income, may simply be proxies for proximity to the political system.

## Conclusion

In studying political polarization in the United States, it is important to consider the “us versus them” mentality that accompanies diverging positions on important issues. We attempt to measure this psychological component of party polarization using questions common to the NES battery for several elections. We find that the 2004 election stands out as the most polarized campaign in forty years. This is consistent with several studies that have documented growing party polarization in the American public (Hetherington 2001; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, 2005; Layman 2001). One dissenter is Fiorina (2005: 25), who argues that there is partisan polarization but not “popular” polarization along other lines. However, today political parties are the primary organizing force in American mass politics. To look for another type of polarization is to look for a straw man.

In examining sources of party polarization in the United States, we find evidence consistent with the theory that polarization is an elite-driven phenomenon. We find the strongest levels of polarization among those closest or most attentive to political elites in the United States. By comparison, we find little evidence that cognitive dispositions or regional differences are sources of party polarization. From our view, polarization at the elite level shows no signs of abating. Thus, party polarization among the public should continue as well.

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Table 1  
Measures of Party Polarization in Presidential Elections

Year	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004
Correlation between party thermometers	-.37	-.18	.02 <sup>ns</sup>	.02 <sup>ns</sup>	-.23	-.40	-.39	-.27	-.40	-.36	-.47
Correlation between candidate thermometers	NA	-.17	-.42	-.30	-.29	-.53	-.38	-.39	-.42	-.39	-.61

Source: National Election Studies

Table 2  
Party Polarization by Partisan Commitment in 2004

Strength of Partisanship:	Correlation between party thermometers	Correlation between candidate thermometers
Pure Independent	.30	-.28
Independent Leaner	-.17	-.51
Weak Partisan	-.32	-.47
Strong Partisan	-.70	-.78
Campaign Activity:		
None	-.29	-.50
One Activity	-.51	-.55
Two or more	-.60	-.80
Cares who wins election:		
No	-.08 <sup>ns</sup>	-.06 <sup>ns</sup>
Yes	-.50	-.65

Source: 2004 American National Election Study

Table 3  
Party Polarization by Other Political Involvement in 2004

Member of an organization (non-religious):	Correlation between party thermometers	Correlation between candidate thermometers
No	-.43	-.57
Yes	-.52	-.68
Worked with others in the community:		
No	-.46	-.59
Yes	-.52	-.68

Source: 2004 American National Election Study

Table 4  
Party Polarization by Political Attention in 2004

Important differences between parties:	Correlation between party thermometers	Correlation between candidate thermometers
No	-.18	-.49
Yes	-.53	-.64
Political Knowledge:		
Low	-.36	-.47
Medium	-.47	-.63
High	-.57	-.72
Interest in campaign:		
Not much	-.25	-.37
Somewhat	-.39	-.56
Very much	-.58	-.70

Source: 2004 American National Election Study

Table 5  
Mobilization Correlates of Party Polarization in 2004

Contacted by one of the political parties:	Correlation between party thermometers	Correlation between candidate thermometers
No	-.36	-.57
Yes	-.60	-.67
Union member in household:		
No	-.48	-.60
Yes	-.41	-.63

Source: 2004 American National Election Study

Table 6  
Media Usage Correlates of Party Polarization in 2004

Listens to political talk radio:	Correlation between party thermometers	Correlation between candidate thermometers
No	-.37	-.53
Yes	-.56	-.70
Saw campaign information on the Internet:		
No Internet access	-.37	-.55
No (but has Internet access)	-.45	-.57
Yes	-.55	-.69
Read about campaign in a newspaper in past week:		
Did not read a newspaper in the past week	-.40	-.49
No, but did read a newspaper	-.49	-.62
Yes	-.49	-.65
Attention to campaign on national TV news:		
Didn't watch national TV news	-.38	-.59
Some, very little, or none	-.44	-.54
Quite a bit or a great deal	-.53	-.67

Source: 2004 American National Election Study

Table 7  
Individual Correlates of Party Polarization in 2004

Prefers to solve simple or complex problems:	Correlation between party thermometers	Correlation between candidate thermometers
Simple	-.47	-.59
Complex	-.47	-.65
Likes responsibility for situations that require thinking:		
Dislikes	-.54	-.62
Neither likes nor dislikes	-.48	-.63
Likes	-.44	-.61

Source: 2004 American National Election Study

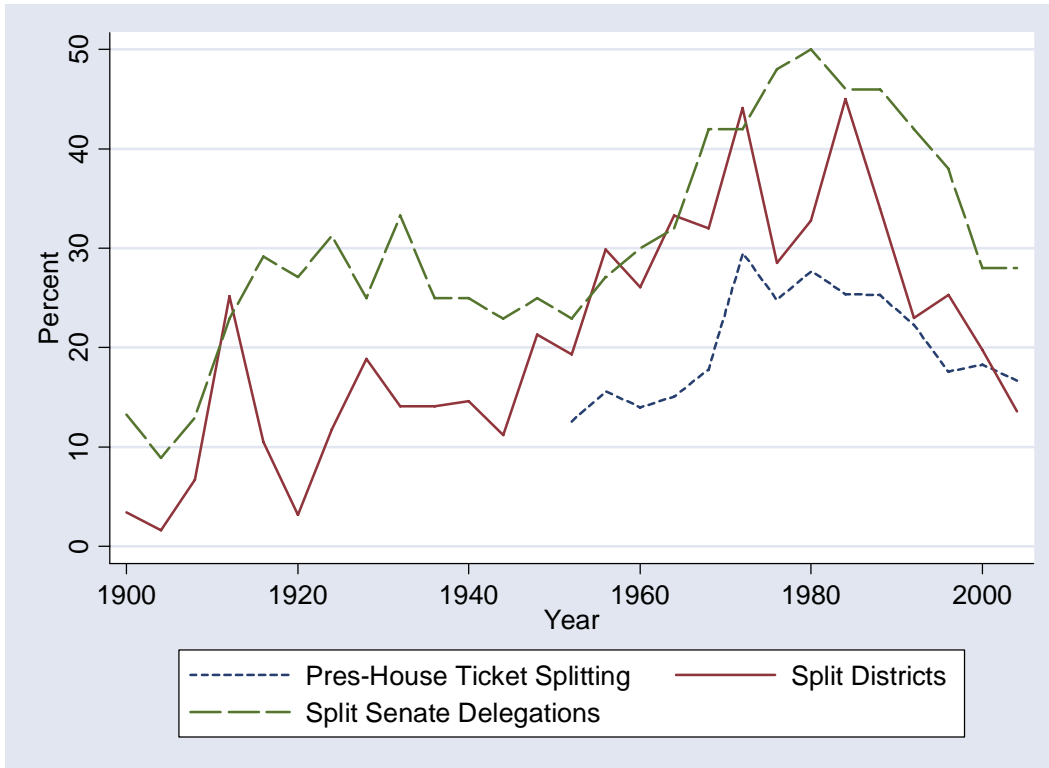


Table 8  
Demographic Correlates of Party Polarization in 2004

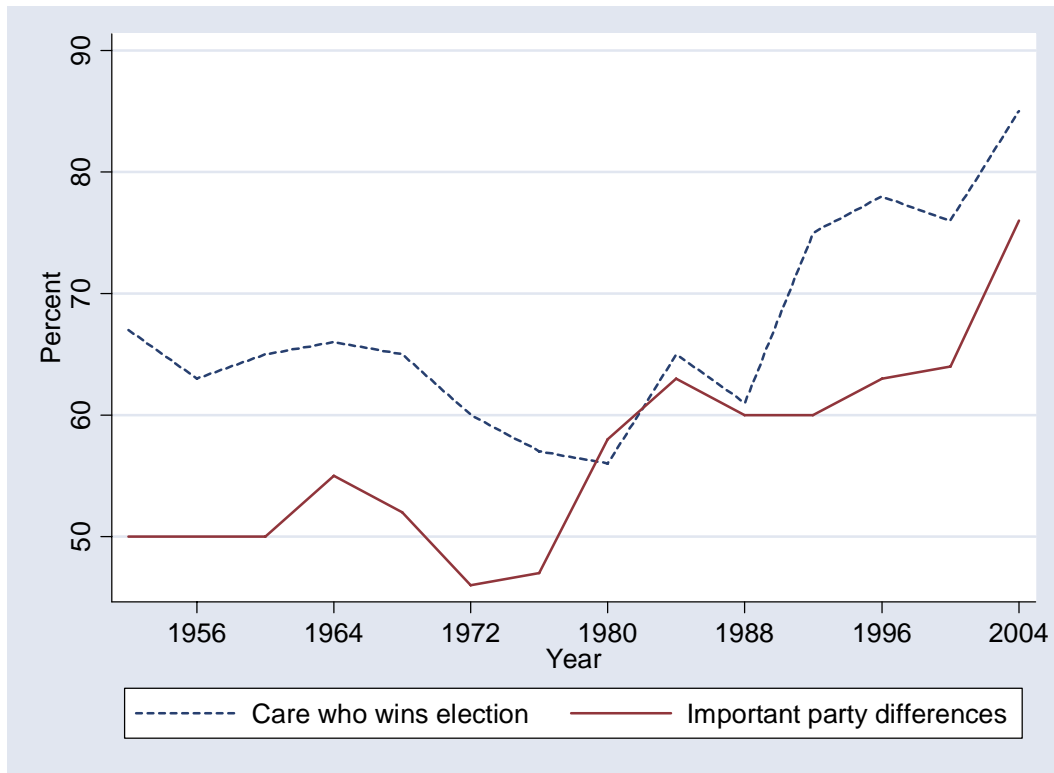
State partisanship:	Correlation between party thermometers	Correlation between candidate thermometers
Red	-.49	-.58
Purple (battleground)	-.50	-.62
Blue	-.43	-.63
Region:		
Northeast	-.44	-.63
North Central	-.54	-.63
South	-.48	-.60
West	-.40	-.58
Sex:		
Male	-.41	-.58
Female	-.52	-.64
Race:		
Non-white	-.26	-.43
White	-.52	-.64
Income:		
Bottom third	-.39	-.49
Middle third	-.44	-.63
Top third	-.62	-.67
Age:		
18-35	-.39	-.57
36-60	-.47	-.61
Over 60	-.54	-.64
Marital status:		
Married	-.54	-.66
Unmarried	-.34	-.51

Source: 2004 American National Election Study

**Figure 1**  
**Indicators of Ticket Splitting, 1900-2004**



**Figure 2**  
**By-Products of Partisan Polarization, 1952-2004**



<sup>1</sup> The poll numbers were retrieved from PollingReport.com on September 28, 2005

(<http://www.pollingreport.com/disasters.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> The weaker correlation between party thermometers prior to 1980 may be a question-wording artifact. Prior to 1978, NES asked respondents to rate “Republicans” and “Democrats” on the feeling thermometers. Since then, NES has asked people to rate the “Republican party” and the “Democratic party”.

<sup>3</sup> Our campaign activity measure is constructed from six items that asked respondents whether or not they participated in specific actions (tried to influence others, attended a meeting, wore a campaign button or sign, donated to a candidate, donated to a party).

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<sup>4</sup> Our political knowledge measure is constructed from eight factual questions in the NES survey (identifying individual political figures, which party is more conservative, and which party controls more seats in the House and Senate). We summed the number of correct responses to the eight items. We then collapsed the resulting scale into thirds.

<sup>5</sup> We categorize Red, Purple, and Blue states using the same classification as Abramowitz and Saunders (2005). George Bush won the Red states by at least 6 percentage points, and John Kerry won the Blue states by at least 6 percentage points. The margin of victory in the Purple states was less than 6 points.