

US Political Polarization – Spring 2022

Aarhus University

Adam Peresman

Contents/Description:

Political polarization, especially in the US, has been a topic of academic interest for some time now. However, the heated 2020 election, as well as the storming of the Capitol, have given the issue an ever greater importance. Although the US is just one particular country, understanding what is taking place there should be relevant to anyone who is interested in political science and democratic stability.

In this course, we will delve into the various forms of political polarization which may be present in the current day US. Although it may seem like there is consensus on this topic, there is in fact disagreement about what forms of polarization exist, the extent of the polarization, the causes for it and what the effects may be. In this course you will explore these debates, evaluate the evidence and be able to come to your own conclusions.

In order to properly assess the arguments and evidence, we will use the seminars to examine some of the methods and measures used in the research. Understanding how they work, and what their pros and cons may be, will allow you to give an informed critique of the literature.

For the final examination, you will be asked to write a paper which takes the lessons drawn from the US experience and applies them in a different setting. How well can we generalize from the US example? This will be your opportunity to answer that question. More details about the exam will be given in class.

Course goals:

- Develop a strong understanding of the different forms of political polarization
- Be able to examine the evidence and arguments that these different forms are present in the US
- Understand various theories for what may be causing this polarization
- Critically evaluate many of the methods used in the research discussed in the course
- Be able to coherently discuss political polarization, making use of academic arguments and evidence.

Books used:

- “Polarization: What everyone needs to know” – Nolan McCarty (5 of 8 chapters assigned)
 - Available as e-book [link](#)

- “Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting and Political Stalemate” – Morris P. Fiorina (6 of 12 chapters assigned)
 - Available as e-book [link](#)
- “Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics” – Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler (8 of 10 chapters assigned)
 - Available as e-book [link](#)
- “Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity” – Lilliana Mason (7 of 8 chapters assigned)

Notes: Although the complete books haven't been assigned for the class, the remaining chapters may be of help when writing your final papers. All four books are available for purchase through the university's bookstore. Additionally, three of the four are available for free as e-books, through the library.

A quick note on classroom exercises:

This all may change! I have my current ideas below about what I think will be good and useful for everyone, both for developing an understanding of the course content, learning certain skills, and preparing you all for the final exam. However, we will see what works and what doesn't and the plan may therefore change.

Class 1 – Introduction – (04 Feb)

In the introduction week we'll look at two introductory chapters, both of which will provide somewhat differing introductions to many of the ideas we will encounter in the course. We will also look at the summary of proposals the APSR made in 1950, at a time of lower polarization, in which they called for *more* polarization in the American political system. I think that's worth discussing before getting into a deep discussion of the current polarization in the US.

Required reading:

- "Polarization: What everyone needs to know" **chapter 2** (14 pages)
- "Unstable Majorities" **chapter 1** (17 pages)
- Summary of Conclusions and Proposals. (1950). *The American Political Science Review*, 44(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1950998> (14 pages)

Total page count: 45 pages

Class Exercise:

Today we won't have any classroom exercises, per se. It's an introduction day. We will discuss our goals for the course, what our backgrounds are, and what our expectations should be, among other things.

Class 2 – Elite Polarization – (11 Feb)

Although there is much disagreement in the academic literature about many issues in political polarization, there is strong agreement about the existence of *elite* polarization. Therefore, this forms a good launching point for the substance of the course.

Required reading:

- "Polarization: What everyone needs to know" **chapter 3** (28 pages)
- Theriault, S. M. (2006). Party polarization in the US Congress: Member replacement and member adaptation. *Party Politics*, 12(4), 483-503. (21 pages)
- Shipan, C. R., & Lowry, W. R. (2001). Environmental policy and party divergence in congress. *Political Research Quarterly*, 54(2), 245-263. (19 pages)

Total page count: 68 pages

Class Exercise:

Today you're not going to learn how to perform statistical tests, but we'll go over how to interpret some of them. Looking specifically at the types of graphs and tables you'll encounter in the class, we'll see how we can make sense of them.

Class 3 – Median voter theorem – (18 Feb)

If there is elite polarization in the US, especially among members of the political class, it's worth considering how this can occur, if the predictions of the median voter theorem hold true. Therefore, after going over a key article which formed the median voter model, we'll read some recent articles which help explain how or why this polarization may be occurring.

Required reading:

- Downs, A. (1957). An economic theory of political action in a democracy. *Journal of political economy*, 65(2), 135-150. (16 pages)
- Bawn, K., Cohen, M., Karol, D., Masket, S., Noel, H., & Zaller, J. (2012). A theory of political parties: Groups, policy demands and nominations in American politics. *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(3), 571-597. (27 pages)
- Layman, G. C., Carsey, T. M., Green, J. C., Herrera, R., & Cooperman, R. (2010). Activists and conflict extension in American party politics. *American Political Science Review*, 104(2), 324-346. (23 pages)

Total page count: 66 pages

Recommended reading:

- Saunders, K. L., & Abramowitz, A. I. (2004). Ideological realignment and active partisans in the American electorate. *American Politics Research*, 32(3), 285-309. (25 pages)

Class Exercise:

TV time. Let's look at clips from US Presidential debates. What do you make of them? How have they changed?

Class 4 – Mass sorting? – (25 Feb)

Although there is overwhelming agreement about the existence of elite polarization, there is very little agreement about the form of polarization which has taken place amongst the electorate. This week we will see the argument that it is not polarization which has taken place, but ideological (party) sorting.

Required reading:

- "Unstable Majorities" chapters 2-3 (50 pages)
- "Unstable Majorities" chapter 6 (15 pages)

Total page count: 65 pages

Class Exercise:

Following up on last week, and anticipating your papers, discuss in groups how the structure of a particular country (institutional forms, voting system, etc) may impact elite polarization and party sorting. What would you expect to be similar? What would you expect to be different?

Class 5 – Mass polarization? – (04 Mar)

This week we continue the discussion from last week and try to examine some of the arguments and evidence that, beyond sorting, polarization has also occurred. These two weeks will also, hopefully, make clear the differences between mass sorting and mass polarization, two concepts that are often used interchangeably in popular media. Whatever practical differences there are in the *effects* of these phenomena will be something we will return to throughout the course.

Required reading:

- Abramowitz, A. I., & Saunders, K. L. (2008). Is polarization a myth?. *The Journal of Politics*, 70(2), 542-555. (14 pages)
- Jacobson, G. C. (2012). The electoral origins of polarized politics: Evidence from the 2010 cooperative congressional election study. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 56(12), 1612-1630. (19 pages)
- Pew Research (2014). Political Polarization in the American Public. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/> (Just section 1). (20 pages)

Total page count: 53 pages

Recommended reading:

- McCright, A. M., & Dunlap, R. E. (2011). The politicization of climate change and polarization in the American public's views of global warming, 2001–2010. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 52(2), 155-194. (40 pages)

Class Exercise:

Which side is right? And does it matter? We will have two debates. First, two groups will debate whether what we see is solely sorting or whether we do see mass political polarization. Second, two other groups will debate whether it matters a lot or actually very little.

Class 6 – Authoritarianism and Polarization (Part I) – (11 Mar)

Whether through sorting or polarization, it appears like a realignment has occurred around the types of issues which matter most to voters. Although this has been called by a number of names, we will mainly discuss this in terms of a shift to polarization along authoritarian values. This week we will introduce authoritarianism as a concept and begin to look at the argument

set out in Hetherington and Weiler (2009), that it is in fact these values which form the current cleavage in American politics.

Required reading:

- "Authoritarianism and Polarization" **chapters 1-3** (62 pages)

Total page count: 62 pages

Recommended reading:

- Feldman, S. (2003). Enforcing social conformity: A theory of authoritarianism. *Political psychology*, 24(1), 41-74. (34 pages)

Class Exercise:

What are these authoritarianism scales like? What about similar ones? Today you'll be surveyed. What do you think of them? Do they seem to measure what you expected them to measure? And, if it works today... we'll look at the class results. How do you compare to Americans?

Class 7 – Authoritarianism and Polarization (Part II) – (18 Mar)

This week will continue the theme from last week.

Required reading:

- "Authoritarianism and Polarization" **chapters 5-6** (49 pages)
- "Authoritarianism and Polarization" **chapters 9-10** (31 pages)

Total page count: 80 pages

Class Exercise:

Following the exercise from last week, this week you'll make your own scales. What do we think of them? What sorts of considerations did you have while making them? We'll also have a bit of a discussion about the tradeoffs one must make, why we use these scales in the first place, and how we can measure and test them.

Class 8 – Historical causes and comparisons – (25 Mar)

At this point, it's worth going into some of the historical decisions and evolutions which took place which may have helped get the US to where it is now. This week will also help put the current polarization into a historical perspective.

Required reading:

- "Authoritarianism and Polarization" **chapter 4** (22 pages)
- "Polarization: What everyone needs to know" **chapters 5-6** (65 pages)
- "Unstable Majorities" **chapter 9** (7 pages)

Total page count: 94 pages

Class Exercise:

In groups, you will be given reading material on different historical periods in the US. After discussing the similarities and differences with today's polarization, please share your thoughts with the rest of the class.

Class 9 – Affective polarization – (01 Apr)

DUE TODAY – PAPER OUTLINES/SUMMARIES

So far, we've discussed forms of ideological or issue-based polarization. However, central to current debates is the growth of affective polarization. Here we will get a good overview of this phenomenon, its extent, and how it may be linked to the ideological shifts we have discussed.

Required reading:

- Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology a social identity perspective on polarization. *Public opinion quarterly*, 76(3), 405-431. (27 pages)
- Webster, S. W., & Abramowitz, A. I. (2017). The ideological foundations of affective polarization in the US electorate. *American Politics Research*, 45(4), 621-647. (27 pages)
- Chen, M. K., & Rohla, R. (2018). The effect of partisanship and political advertising on close family ties. *Science*, 360(6392), 1020-1024. (5 pages)
- Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2015). Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(3), 690-707. (18 pages)

Total page count: 77 pages

Class Exercise:

We have now presented the major forms of polarization. In groups, discuss and then present how these different forms may relate to each other. What questions do you have? How would you try to answer them?

Class 10 – Identity and polarization – (08 Apr)

A major argument, especially tied to the growth of affective polarization, is that the two parties have become identities for many members of the public. Sometimes you will hear, for instance, that political parties are becoming like “tribes” or “teams”. This week, we will read and discuss the major book in political science which makes this argument. If you are ambitious, read the appendix and think critically about how the argument is made and the evidence used to support it.

Required reading:

- "Uncivil Agreement" chapters 1-7 (126 pages)

Total page count: 126 pages

Class Exercise:

Feedback on paper outlines/summaries.

Class 11 – Negative partisanship – (22 Apr)

Related to, and somewhat contrary to the account from the previous week, is the emergence of “negative partisanship” as a separate phenomenon and measure in political science. What does it tell us about political (especially affective) polarization? What does it add to the identity-based discussion from last week?

Required reading:

- Abramowitz, A. I., & Webster, S. (2016). The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of US elections in the 21st century. *Electoral Studies*, 41, 12-22. (11 pages)
- Bankert, A. (2020). Negative and positive partisanship in the 2016 US presidential elections. *Political Behavior*, 1-19. (19 pages)

Total page count: 30 pages

Recommended reading:

- Garrett, K. N., & Bankert, A. (2020). The moral roots of partisan division: How moral conviction heightens affective polarization. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(2), 621-640. (20 pages)

Class Exercise:

Today we’re having a bit of a writing workshop – in reverse. We’re going to discuss, namely, what makes a paper a *bad* paper.

Class 12 – Media effects – (28 Apr)

A likely contributing factor to much of the polarization we see today is the media and how it has transformed over the past 20+ years. Therefore, this week we will look at some of the evidence for this effect, how strong that evidence may be, as well as discuss the difficulties in measuring this phenomenon.

Required reading:

- Hopkins, D. J., & Ladd, J. M. (2013). The consequences of broader media choice: Evidence from the expansion of Fox News. *Available at SSRN 2070596*. (34 pages)
- Lelkes, Y., Sood, G., & Iyengar, S. (2017). The hostile audience: The effect of access to broadband internet on partisan affect. *American Journal of Political Science*, 61(1), 5-20. (16 pages)
- Jurkowitz M, Mitchell A, Shearer E, et al. (2020) U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided. Pew Research Center. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>. (24 pages)

Total page count: 74

Recommended reading:

- Hmielowski, J. D., Beam, M. A., & Hutchens, M. J. (2016). Structural changes in media and attitude polarization: Examining the contributions of TV news before and after the Telecommunications Act of 1996. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 28(2), 153-172. (20 pages)

Class Exercise:

The argument that the media has a large effect is very disputed in the literature. So, let's see the other side. In this week's activity, groups will be given one article which argues that the effects of media are limited. Discuss and then present the articles to the rest of the class. Do these provide a good counter to what's been assigned? How would you critique them?

Class 13 – Media and perceptions – (06 May)

DUE TODAY – PAPER DRAFTS

This week will continue the discussion from last week and extend it in a particular direction: how might the media be influencing the perceptions of the opposing political party – leading to what some have called a “false polarization”.

Required reading:

- Yudkin, D., Hawkins, S., & Dixon, T. (2019). The perception gap: How false impressions are pulling Americans apart. (47 pages)

- Levendusky, M. S., & Malhotra, N. (2016). (Mis) perceptions of partisan polarization in the American public. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 378-391. (14 pages)

Total page count: 61 pages

Recommended reading:

- Goldberg. (2020). How the Media Led the Great Racial Awakening. Available at: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/media-great-racial-awakening> (51 pages)

Class Exercise:

What do you predict is in store for the US 2030? Let's discuss.

Class 14 – Consequences – (12 May)

In our final week we will discuss some potential consequences of the political polarization we are seeing in the US. In addition to the assigned reading, it is worth looking back to and reflecting on the recommendations made in 1950 about the need for greater polarization.

Required reading:

- "Polarization: What everyone needs to know" **chapter 7** (22 pages)
- "Unstable Majorities" **chapter 4** (23 pages)
- Hetherington, M. J., & Rudolph, T. J. (2018). Political trust and polarization. In *The Oxford handbook of social and political trust* (pp. 579-597). Oxford University Press. (19 pages) **Available as e-book [link](#)**
- Kingzette, J., Druckman, J. N., Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M., & Ryan, J. B. (2021). How affective polarization undermines support for democratic norms. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 85(2), 663-677. (15 pages)

Total page count: 79 pages

Class Exercise:

Feedback on paper drafts.

Total required pages: 980

You will also be expected to read a significant amount of additional material when writing your exam.