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Charles Jolm Manter

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THE NATURE AND INTERSECTION OF PARTISANSHIP AND IDEOLOGY

By

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Thesis Director: Seth C. McKee, Ph.D.
Professor, College of Arts and Sciences
My Introduction to Politics

My first encounter of the political kind occurred in 1992, when a kindergarten classmate asked me who my parents voted for. Based on some dinner conversations, which went mostly over my head, I knew they voted for Bill Clinton. He told me his parents voted for Bush. At that time, a “party” was something associated only with birthdays and I was unaware of the existence of the word “ideology.” I understood, however, that politics entails conflict. His parents voted for someone different than my parents voted for: his parents lost and my parents won.

Over the next several years, my understanding of politics increased only by knowing that my mother is a Democrat, my father is a Republican, Bill Clinton had an affair, my grandmother yells at the Republicans on Meet the Press every Sunday morning, and she never voted for one in all of her eighty-plus years. I did not know about the nature of the disagreements between the two parties, but I knew the conflict is not so grave that you cannot be married to someone from the opposing party; that some people, like my father, sometimes vote for candidates from the opposing party; and others, like my grandmother, never vote for candidates from the opposing party.

I attained political consciousness in eighth grade, during the 2000 election (not political consciousness in the Marxian sense that I finally rejected my own subordination, but rather in the sense that I finally had a rudimentary understanding the issues that the parties disagree about). A social studies course required me to research candidates’ positions on a litany issues for a mock debate, in which I played Al Gore. A combination of newspaper articles and information on the Internet (certainly nothing like congressional roll call data) left me with the impressions that Democratic politicians agree with one another on everything, Republican politicians agree with one another on everything, and there is no consensus whatsoever between the two parties. During
the debate, my opponent referred to himself and all of his policies, with pride, as “conservative” and to myself and all of my policies, with disdain, as “liberal.” My understanding of politics finally included an ideological element: Democratic elites support uniformly liberal policies and Republican elites support uniformly conservative policies.

Anecdotal evidence from interviews conducted with family members and friends (certainly not a representative sample, like that of an academic public survey) indicated that the masses behave similarly to elites. I found that although a significant minority of people does not belong to any party and does not participate at all in politics, of the majority of people who identify with a party, most agree with their party on nearly everything. I found that some of those who identify with a party, however, disagree with their party on a significant number of issues and that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to belong in this category.

Elite behavior and most of the mass behavior seemed logical and inevitable to me. It made sense that opposing parties are structured around opposing ideologies. I failed to understand why opposing gun control and opposing to the right to an abortion are part of the same ideology (to me, the opposite made more sense) or why they are both “conservative” positions, but people much smarter than me insisted they are, so I took these things for granted. I wrote off those instances where people stray from their party’s ideology as anomalies. I viewed partisanship and ideology as synonymous.

In my first university political science course—Political Behavior and Public Opinion, which caused me to switch majors—I used the terms liberal and Democrat or conservative and Republican interchangeably. My professor insisted that ideology and partisanship are different—that although it is not the case today, there was a time when Congress contained liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats and considerable ideological overlap existed between
the parties. The elite behavior and most of the mass behavior that previously seemed logical and inevitable was neither and perhaps those partisans I wrote off as anomalies were no such thing.

If elite Democrats and elite Republicans drifted apart ideologically over the past half century, what happened to ideology in the electorate over that period? The first section of this analysis addresses the connection between elite ideology and mass ideology. The second and third sections address whether or not my anecdotal evidence reflects the current state of mass ideology: is there an ideological gap between the two parties in the electorate and are Republicans more ideologically homogenous than Democrats in the electorate?

**Section I: Elite-Mass Dynamics**

It is theoretically possible that the masses obtain ideology independently of elites and that elite ideology is entirely a function of mass ideology. One of the earliest explanations of the interaction between elite ideology and mass ideology assumes exactly that—mass ideology is exogenous. A model of spatial competition determines the parties' ideologies. Since the U.S. uses a single-member district plurality voting system, which “literally pulverize[s] third parties,” the model assumes only two parties (Duverger 1973, p. 23). The model also follows in the classical economic tradition and assumes that a voter is a rational actor, basing her vote entirely on maximizing her payoff—in this case voting for the party that is located nearest to her on a two-dimensional liberal-conservative spectrum. The Nash equilibrium outcome of this model is for both parties to position themselves in the exact same spot—the ideology corresponding to that of the median voter (Downs 1957). Based on this finding, one reasonably expects the Democratic and Republican Parties to be ideologically similar.

The assumption that voters are ideological, let alone that they acquire ideology independently of elites, runs counter to the most influential work on public opinion of that time,
The American Voter, and many others since. Campbell et al. conduct a series of representative interviews to determine whether or not the liberal-conservative “notion” is widespread within the electorate (1960, p. 217). Asking respondents open-ended questions about the respondents’ likes and dislikes about the two parties and the two presidential candidates at the time, they find that only a very small portion of the mass public—less than 12 percent—thinks in constrained ideological terms (Campbell et al. 1960). The Downsian model, nonetheless, gained popularity because it was an elegant and accurate depiction of elite politics at the time, when the two parties’ ideologies overlapped significantly.

As evidence of the ideological homogeneity between the two parties, one needs look no further than the American Political Science Association’s Committee on Political Parties’ report: Toward a More Responsive Two-Party System. Scholars at the time considered the overlap problematic because the “alternatives between the two parties [were] defined so badly that it [was] often difficult to determine what [an] election [had] decided in even the broadest terms” (American Political Science Association 1950, pp. 3-4). Barry Goldwater summarized the reality of the “me too” politics of the mid-century best, with a campaign slogan offering “a choice, not an echo.”

Polarization

“Me too” politics is no longer with us. On the contrary, one of the dominant media narratives about American national politics over the last two decades is that politics is increasingly polarized. Plenty of scholarship corroborates this mainstream media meme. The two parties in Congress are becoming more ideologically homogenous internally and the distance between the two parties is growing (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Poole and Rosenthal (1997) use NOMINATE scores of members’ of Congress ideologies to quantify the polarization, but interest
group ratings of members' of Congress voting records (Stonecash et al. 2003), and the percentage of party-line roll call votes in a given Congress (Fleisher and Bond 2000) produce the same picture.

Scholars disagree about the root cause of the polarization—they advance theories ranging from economic polarization in the electorate (McCarty et al. 1997), to geographic self-selection (Stonecash et al. 2003), to changes in congressional rules (Rohde 1991)—but most concede that the realignment of the South plays a role. Goldwater did offer a choice in the 1964 presidential election and, with his opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, set in motion an exodus of southern whites from the Democratic Party. Carmines and Stimson explain the realignment of the South using the theory of conflict displacement (1989). They argue "most issues most of the time lie dormant, stirring interest only in those especially informed or affected," and civil rights was one of those issues until Goldwater's vote (1989, pp. 159-160).

His vote was a "critical moment" because it was the first time that the titular heads of the two parties took opposing stances on the issue of civil rights, making the issue salient (1989, p. 160). This new cleavage created cross-pressured members of Congress and cross-pressured voters—those who have an allegiance to one party and a pressure to defect to, or at least vote with, the other party, with whom they agree on this important issue. Southern Democratic elites gave in to the latter pressure and joined the Republican Party and southern Democratic voters eventually followed.

Unlike Downs' spatial model, Carmines' and Stimson's theory of conflict displacement predicts polarization. In order for a realignment to take place, elites have to make the new issue the most prominent one, which requires them to downplay the importance of previous disagreements between the parties. Thus, the conflict displacement model only predicts
polarization on one issue dimension, which means it fails to accurately describe the politics of today. The parties are polarized on a whole host of issues: New Deal issues, which polarized them during the Great Depression; racial issues, which polarized them during the 1960s; and cultural issues, which polarized them after Roe v. Wade in 1973. Lee even finds polarization in Congress on issues with no identifiable ideological content (2005).

Conflict Extension

When new issues with the potential to create cleavages arise—the most recent being stem-cell research, gay rights issues, and foreign policy after the invasion of Iraq—the two parties take polarized stances, but do not come to a consensus on former issues or downplay their importance. The New Deal issues are just as polarizing and important as they have ever been. Layman and Carsey term this polarization across multiple issue dimensions “conflict extension,” as opposed to the “conflict displacement” theorized by Carmines and Stimson (Layman and Carsey 2002). But how does conflict extension in Congress affect the mass public? Why have all of these new issues with the potential to lead to a widespread realignment surfaced without producing that realignment?

As Campbell et al. show, the mass public is not very ideologically sophisticated (1960). It is not that the mass public is unqualified to think in constrained ideological terms, but there are costs associated with doing so. Most people do not have enough time or are not interested enough in politics to form a coherent ideological worldview and stay on top of current events, fitting new issues into that matrix—they have to work and take care of their kids and they would rather watch sports and go shopping.

Instead, the mass public commonly employs shortcuts to reach opinions about politics. Chief among those shortcuts is partisanship. If you are a partisan and a new issue emerges on the
scene, like stem-cell research did in 2001, an easy way to formulate a rational opinion on the issue is to adopt the opinion of your party's elites. This is how Layman and Carsey explain the lack of widespread realignment. They cite the longstanding concept, first proposed by Campbell et al., that partisanship is at least as stable and enduring as ideology is (1960). Because of that, Layman and Carsey propose that partisans are likely to just adopt their parties' positions on new issues. The hypothesis is reinforced by highly-esteemed and more contemporary public opinion scholarship, that the mass public is most likely to "receive and accept" new political cues from elites with whom they already agree on other issues (Zaller 1992).

Although there is probably some truth to Downs' model and the idea that elite ideology is affected by mass ideology through elections, it is largely insignificant compared to the effect of elite ideology on mass ideology.

Section II: Polarization in Public

If political elites are polarized and the mass public receives its political cues from those elites, would it not logically follow that the mass public is becoming more polarized, as my anecdotal evidence led me to believe? Since Pat Buchanan announced "there is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America," in his speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention, the idea that the mass public is also polarized has been conventional wisdom in the mainstream media. The electoral maps in 2000 and 2004 fit this "culture war" frame perfectly and a popular satirical map soon made its rounds on the Internet, summarizing the story nicely, with the blue states labeled "The United States of Canada" and the red states labeled "Jesusland."

Unlike the case of elite polarization, the media does not have the facts squarely in their corner on the subject of popular polarization. It remains a hotly debated issue among scholars. Fiorina et al. argue that a closely divided nation is not necessarily a deeply divided nation and
that most Americans are moderate, echoing Converse's assertion that most Americans "are not very well-informed about politics and public affairs, do not care a great deal about politics, do not hold many of their views very strongly, and are not very ideological" (Fiorina et al. 2005, p. 19). American National Election Studies (ANES) data supports their hypothesis. The biennial survey asks voters to place themselves on an ideological scale from 1 (Extremely Liberal) to 7 (Extremely Conservative) and about half of the electorate either place themselves at 4 (Moderate) or are unable to place themselves on the scale. The distribution looks nothing like that of Congress.

A few decades ago, scholars worried that the parties were dying. In the 1970s, parties were hardly the central entities organizing political behavior that they had been in the past. The number of voters who identified themselves as Independents was as high as it had ever been, as was the number of neutral voters—those who did not like or dislike anything in particular about either party (Wattenburg 1984). Candidate-centered elections supplanted party-centered elections and split-ticket voting approached 30 percent (Wattenburg 1984), but beginning about the same time as elite polarization took off in the early 1990s, all of these trends began reversing (Hetherington 2001). Today, party voting is as high as it was in 1950—its previous apex (Abramowitz 2007).

This resurgence of partisanship causes other scholars to contend that polarization does exist in the mass public and that it is increasing, specifically among partisans. Abramowitz does not argue with Fiorina's et al. assertion that the aggregate ideology of the mass public is relatively moderate and that it has changed very little in the last half century. He does, however, find an increasing correlation between ideology and partisanship (Abramowitz 2007). The average American citizen may be moderate, but the average American voter is much less likely
to be moderate. And if that voter is a Democrat/Republican, the probability that she is to the left/right of center on the ideological spectrum has increased remarkably, as has the probability that she will vote for her party’s nominee for President and Congress. If one looks at an ideological distribution of Democratic and Republican midterm voters, it looks strikingly similar to the bimodal, polarized distribution of members’ of Congress ideologies.

Jacobson reaches a similar conclusion by comparing partisans’ approval ratings of President Bush. Using Gallup tracking polls of President Bush’s approval rating, Jacobson finds that the average approval rating among Republicans is 88 percent and among Democrats it is 14 percent, which “makes Bush the most polarizing president on record by a wide margin” (Abramowitz and Jacobson 2006, p. 90). Abramowitz and Jacobson think these findings are worthy of being called polarization.

Fiorina et al. do not quarrel with their findings, but they do not consider the phenomenon polarization. Abramowitz and Jacobson are willing to call it “partisan polarization”: the parties are becoming more internally ideologically homogenous and the ideological distance between the parties is increasing. However, since partisans are still largely not extremists—close to the poles of the distribution—and “pole” is at the root of the term “polarization,” Fiorina et al. prefer to use the term “sorting” to avoid confusion.

Sorting

Whatever one chooses to call it, it is certainly happening. Using ANES data and considering a voter sorted if she places herself on the same side of the midpoint on the liberal-conservative scale that her party is located on, Levendusky finds that less than 30 percent of voters are sorted in 1972 and in 2004, over 45 percent are sorted (2009). These may seem like low numbers in light of how polarized elite politics is, but keeping in mind how few voters think
in ideological terms and how many classify themselves as “moderate” or are unable to classify
themselves, 45 percent is quite high.

To determine the cause of sorting, Levendusky employs the 1992-1996 ANES panel study—a survey where the same respondents are asked questions during three consecutive
election cycles, as opposed to the time-series studies, where respondents are only asked
questions during one election cycle. Using a multiple regression analysis, he finds the best
predictor of a respondent being sorted in 1994 is whether or not they are aware of elite
differences—they place the Democratic Party to the left of the Republican Party on the liberal-

As a robustness check and to prove causation, Levendusky conducts an experiment,
where subjects are briefed on an issue and then asked their opinion on the issue. One group is
told that the two parties’ elites disagree very strongly on the issue; another is told that the two
parties’ elites disagree, but not very strongly, on the issue; and the control group is not informed
about elite positions. Those in the first group are significantly more likely to be sorted than either
of the other groups. The results of both the multiple regression and the experiment reinforce the
conclusion of the previous section that elite ideology strongly influences mass ideology.

So What?

Sorting is happening, but what consequences does it bring? As a thought experiment,
Imagine that only six voters remain in the country: three Democrats and three Republicans. They
decide to elect a new president using the method they are used to: closed partisan primary
elections and a general election between the two primary winners. Assume that all of the voters
are running, they cannot vote for themselves, and votes are determined solely by ideological
proximity. If the parties each contain one liberal, one conservative, and one moderate, the general
election is going to be between a moderate Democrat and a moderate Republican. If, however, the Democratic Party contains two liberals and one moderate and the Republican Party contains two conservatives and one moderate, the election will be between a liberal Democrat and a conservative Republican. Both scenarios have the same partisan and ideological distributions, but the outcomes of the primary elections are dramatically different.

Sorting has consequences for general elections as well. Sorting provides part of the answer for the recent shift from campaigns targeting swing voters to campaigns mobilizing the base because “as the number of sorted voters becomes larger (and the size of the base increases), the relative costs of the base and swing voter strategies shift—base voters become a potentially more lucrative source of votes than swing voters” (Levendusky 2009, p. 129). If one party is better sorted overall than the other, it can pursue a base-mobilization strategy to greater benefit, but differences in issue-level sorting are also consequential. If one party is particularly better sorted than another on a given issue, it provides the better sorted party with a profitable avenue of appeal to cross-pressured partisans from the opposing side.

Sorting has several attitudinal effects on mass behavior as well. Levendusky finds that sorted voters are more likely to support their party at the ballot box, they evaluate their own party more positively and the other party more negatively, and they tend to agree with their parties on a greater number of issues (2009). Having sorted partisans is definitely in the interest of the two parties because of the enormous consequences, but which party is better sorted?

Section III: Partisan Differences

Is my anecdotal evidence that Republicans are more ideologically homogeneous than Democrats correct? Are Republicans better sorted? In an endnote, Levendusky mentions that, in fact, they are (2009). Common wisdom validates his claim. The idea that Republicans march in
lock-step, while Democrats march to the beat of their own drums is popular. Others may cite the fact that the Democratic coalition varies more widely demographically and regionally as a reason the Democrats are worse sorted.

Levendusky mentions that some of the difference in rates of sorting between Democrats and Republicans "undoubtedly stem[s] at least in part from the different valence of the ideological labels 'liberal' and 'conservative'" (2009, p. 156). He is referring to a well-known paradox in American politics: people prefer liberal government, but when asked whether they are liberal or conservative, they have an overwhelming preference for the term conservative (Ellis and Stimson, p. 2).

Conflicted Conservatives

Using the Public Policy Mood survey, Ellis and Stimson demonstrate that in every year from 1970 to 2005, the American public is on the operationally liberal side of neutral, even in the most extreme of conservative years like 1980, but there are almost double the numbers of self-identified conservatives than there are self-identified liberals (Ellis and Stimson, p. 2). Looking more closely at the responses of the self-identified conservatives, when issues are broken down into "social welfare" and "traditional moral" dimensions, Ellis and Stimson find 21 percent are operationally conservative on both dimensions, 30 percent are operationally conservative only on the "traditional moral" dimension, 15 percent are operationally conservative only on the "social welfare" dimension, and 34 percent are not operationally conservative on either dimension, whom Ellis and Stimson dub "conflicted conservatives" (p. 7).

If a full third of self-identified conservatives are conflicted, compared to a mere four percent of self-identified liberals that are conflicted, that should certainly explain a large part of the difference in the rates of sorting between Democrats and Republicans, since Levendusky's
measure only uses the self-identification question. How do we get a more accurate picture of sorting rates? Levendusky also looks at rates of sorting on specific issues. He does not, however, separate Democrats and Republicans on those issues.

Are Republicans better sorted on the issues? It would not be surprising if Republicans are better sorted, but they are by no means as well sorted as the generic liberal-conservative self-identification measure of sorting would lead one to believe. Levendusky finds that sorting is highly correlated with both education and political knowledge, which Republicans have more of (2009). In addition, the Republican coalition is more homogenous with respect to demographic variables, like income and race.

Analyses of the aggregate party ideology have been conducted before. Abramowitz, using the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, creates a measure of ideology by indexing responses to 12 questions. “Democratic House voters had an average score of 28 percent conservative on the scale while Republican House voters had an average score of 70 percent conservative” (Abramowitz 2007, p. 11). One might assume that this means Democrats are better sorted than Republicans, as the average Democrat is closer to her respective ideological pole. These indexed measures of aggregate partisan ideology, however, reveal nothing about rates of sorting. It could be that Republicans are better sorted (more likely to be on the right side of center), but the Democrats who are sorted are significantly more ideologically extreme. In addition, the creation of indexes does not allow us to analyze rates of sorting on an issue by issue basis.

Data

This analysis employs the same ANES survey data (from 1972-2004) as Levendusky’s analysis, but it also includes data from 2008, which was unavailable for his analysis. For
questions where respondents are asked to place themselves on a scale, Levendusky’s definition of sorted is used: a respondent is considered sorted on an issue if she places herself on the same side of the midpoint that her party is located on. For questions where respondents are asked whether they favor or oppose a policy, a respondent is considered sorted if she agrees with her party’s position. Independent identifiers who lean toward a party are counted as partisans, as they behave like weak partisans (Keith et al. 1992)

Several questions asking respondents to place themselves on a scale have been asked in the same format for decades. Questions about liberal-conservative self-identification, aid to minorities, guaranteed jobs, and health insurance have been asked since 1972; questions about defense spending and abortion have been asked since 1980, and a question about government services has been asked since 1982 (although not all were asked in every survey). These questions allow for analysis of intertemporal variation in sorting.

In addition to those seven questions, 13 additional questions are included from the 2008 survey to provide a more complete picture about the current state of sorting. These questions cover a variety of relevant social welfare, moral, and foreign policy issues. These questions, however, will not allow for comparisons across time, as they have not been asked every year.

Results and Analysis

Levendusky is correct that, in terms of ideological self-placement, Republicans are better sorted than Democrats. Both parties are currently better sorted than they were at the beginning of the time-series, but Republicans have increased the margin from 16 percentage points in 1972 to nearly 20 points in 2004 and over 31 points in 2008. The large decline in liberal identification in 2008, however, may end up being a blip in the data. Because nearly a third of conservatives are
conflicted, one would assume Republican edges in sorting anywhere from 14 to 20 percent in the rest of the issues.

Among the other six questions asked over time, the single largest margin is on the aid to minorities question. The gap is less than 15 percentage points in 1972 (about where the ideological self-identification question would lead one to believe), but it grows to nearly 50 percentage points in 2008. This is the only issue where one party is consistently trends upward and the other consistently trends downward. When the parties move in opposite directions on rates of sorting, it is not a polarization effect, where the parties are moving apart ideologically, but rather a mainstream effect, where they are moving closer together ideologically. In every year but 1990-1994, where there is little movement on the issue, the two parties move in the same direction ideologically.

It should be noted that, like many other analyses, only the answers of white respondents are included as data. In a short section on the variance in sorting across issues, Levendusky mentions that changes in the meaning of questions over time, with aid to minorities increasingly associated with “unpopular welfare programs,” may be responsible for the growing gap on this question (2009, p. 52).
The only issue, other than aid to minorities, where Republicans are consistently better sorted than Democrats is on guaranteed jobs. Unlike aid to minorities though, both parties are becoming more sorted over time. Democrats move from 34 to 44 percent sorted and Republicans move from 49 to 64 percent sorted over the time-series. Although the overall trend is an increase in sorting, the year-to-year variation is similar to that of aid to minorities because of the mainstream effect. The parties move in opposite directions on the graph (the same direction ideologically) in all of the 17 years except 1976, 1994, and 2008 and the changes in those three years are three of the least significant, in terms of magnitude, shifts in the series.
The only issue where Democrats are consistently better sorted than Republicans is on abortion. Once again, both parties are better sorted at the end of the time-series than at the beginning. The trend is more stable than that of guaranteed jobs, mainstream effects are not noticeable, and both parties increase their level of sorting virtually equally. A gap of 11 points in 1980 is a gap of 12 points in 2008.

The abortion question is slightly different than the other six questions. Instead of a seven-point scale with a midpoint, the abortion scale only has four points. The responses considered on the Republican side are that “by law, abortion should never be permitted” and “the law should only permit abortion in the case of rape, incest, or when the woman’s life is in danger.” The points considered on the Democratic side are that “the law should permit abortions for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life, but only after the need for an abortion has been clearly established” and “by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.” If one considers the Republican position to only the first option and the Democratic position to only include the last option, the trends look very similar, but obviously both parties are less sorted.
The remaining three issues are less clear than the previous ones. Neither party is better sorted in every year on any of the issues. The issue with the narrowest margin is health insurance. Both parties' levels of sorting are relatively stable until 1992, when there is a Democratic uptick, probably caused by Bill Clinton’s focus on it during the election. In 1994, however, there is a mainstream effect in response to “Hillarycare,” where both parties become more conservative on the issue. Since then, the mainstream effect has continued, with Republican opposition to government health care decreasing slightly and Democratic support increasing slightly to a five or six point lead in 2004 and 2008.

The issue of government services produces more volatile gaps. It is no surprise that Republicans are better sorted in the peak conservative years of this scale, like the beginning of the Reagan administration and during the Republican Revolution of the early 1990s. The most important fact, however, is that this is the issue where the mainstream effect is strongest. The two parties move in the same ideological direction on services in all 12 years that the question is asked. There seems to be a cyclical aspect to this question. Democrats are much better sorted in 2008 than they are in 1982, but I suspect they are not much better sorted in 2010 than they are in 1984.
Defense spending is clearly the most volatile issue, where the parties jump from just over 10 percent sorted to almost 50 percent sorted and over 70 percent sorted to nearly 20 percent sorted, respectively. No other issue has that kind of volatility because no other issue has the urgency of defense spending. Once again, the differences in rates of sorting are the result of mainstream effects and not polarization effects. As the Cold War is ending, Republicans become less sorted and Democrats become more sorted because the public, on average, wants to spend less on defense. The mainstream effect we see in 2000 is probably the result of the U.S. embassy bombings and the bombing of the USS Cole—the beginnings of the War on Terror. One could expect to see a continuation of the mainstream effect due to 9/11 if the survey asked about defense spending in 2002. From 2004 to 2008, we see a mainstream effect in the opposite direction as fatigue with the wars increases among both parties.
The over-time issues leave a cloudy picture. There has been a larger increase in the preference for the term “conservative” than for the term “liberal,” but both parties are becoming better sorted on that question. Both parties are moving in the same ideological direction on the aid to minorities issue. Other than defense, which none of the other issues have the urgency of and which seems largely nonpartisan, none of the other issues come close to the 20 to 30 percentage point gap produced for the Republicans by the liberal-conservative question.

The Republicans are not even better sorted on most of the remaining issues. Both parties are becoming better sorted on guaranteed jobs, abortion, and health insurance. Republicans have a pretty wide lead on the first item, the Democrats have a less wide lead on the second, and the third is pretty much a coin flip. In 2008, Democrats are more sorted and Republicans are less sorted on the issue of government services than they were in 1972. The mass public, however, unlike in the case of the aid to minorities issue, is not trending consistently in one direction. The issue of government services has a cyclical aspect to it.

Not only could the liberal-conservative self-identification question be misleading because it inflates a slim Republican edge in sorting, it is possible that it disguises an actual Democratic edge in sorting. To get a broader picture of sorting today, all of the issue-based questions from
2008, where voters could clearly be identified as sorted and not sorted, are included in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social welfare issues</th>
<th>Percentage of Republicans Sorted</th>
<th>Percentage of Democrats Sorted</th>
<th>Republican advantage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aid to minorities</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guaranteed jobs</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privatization of Social Security</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health insurance</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government services</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription drug coverage for seniors</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral issues</td>
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<td>Death penalty</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>Gay adoption</td>
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<td>55</td>
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<td>Abortion</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gay marriage/civil unions</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>-23</td>
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<td>Gays in the military</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>-55</td>
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<td>Defense issues</td>
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<td>Invasion of Iraq</td>
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<td>79</td>
<td>-13</td>
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<td>Deadline for withdrawal from Iraq</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>-19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Torture of suspected terrorists</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>-29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gun control</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher emissions standards</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher fuel standards</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>-82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 19 issues, Republicans are better sorted on seven. The most advantageous characterization for Republicans would be to exclude the four most overwhelmingly popular Democratic positions—prescription drug coverage for seniors, which was passed by a Republican President; allowing gays to serve openly in the military; higher emissions standards; and higher fuel standards—as well as the question about torture of suspected terrorists (because respondents could consider enhanced interrogation techniques separate from “torture”), and to combine the two Iraq-related issues into only one favorable issue for the Democrats.
The leaves Republicans better sorted on aid to minorities, guaranteed jobs, privatization of social security, the death penalty, gay adoption, defense spending, and gun control (if “keep laws about the same” is counted as sorted for Republicans) and Democrats better sorted on health insurance, government services, abortion, gay marriage (if support of civil unions is counted as sorted for Republicans), Iraq, and immigration. The Republicans are sorted on seven of 13 issues, a narrow majority, and the least relevant issue to today’s politics—the death penalty—is one of the issues included.

Claiming a significant difference in sorting for Republicans is difficult. Especially because the partisan gap in 2008 was its highest in a decade, with 51 percent of voters identifying as Democrats and 37 percent identifying as Republicans. It is not as if the Republicans’ levels of sorting are deflated by Independent leaners. At best, the parties are quite equally well sorted and the data could possibly indicate that Democrats are better sorted. Of course, that could all have changed by now, but probably not by much. It seems that neither party enjoys the spoils that come with having a better sorted party like the advantage in base-mobilization, the greater number of wedge-issue possibilities, or the advantage in loyalty.

**Conclusion**

The connection between elite ideology and mass ideology is clear: elite ideology has an overwhelming influence on mass ideology. My anecdotal evidence from interviews with family and friends exaggerates the sophistication of the mass public, the ideological gap between the parties in the electorate, and the Republican edge in ideological homogeneity. As elites became increasingly polarized over the past half-century, partisans have not polarized in a similar fashion because they are not sophisticated enough conceptually. Instead of becoming more extreme, partisans have become better sorted. It is difficult to distinguish which party, if any, is better
sorted. The two parties seem equally equipped to take advantage of the possibilities that sorting brings. Sorting is likely to slow its pace because elites cannot become much more polarized and there is an upper bound to sorting because of the number of citizens who are politically uninvolved. Overall, the electorate is quite balanced, which the recent swings in Congressional control reflect.
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