

**Keeping Your Enemies Close:  
Electoral Rules and Partisan Polarization**

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**Abstract:** This essay takes issue with the dominant notion that political polarization can be understood as a process through which parties diverge on a single dimension of political conflict. Rather, I introduce the notion that affective political polarization intensifies when new issue dimensions are added. In a two-party system, the parties will appear to be moving further from the average voter, and further from one another, if they offer ever-more heterogeneous and incoherent bundles of platforms over time as new issues are politicized. In the United States, as a result, increasing hostility toward the out-party goes hand in hand with increased ambivalence about the in-party. Meanwhile, the parties become increasingly internally fractious. In a multi-party system, on the other hand, when new issues emerge, parties can position themselves throughout the multi-dimensional issue space. As a result, voters feel closer not only to their in-party, but also to the average out-party. In this way, I suggest that multi-party systems can reduce overall levels of affective polarization.

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The contemporary United States is often described as a society divided along a single, overarching left-right political dimension, with Democrats on one side and Republicans on the other. The parties are described as two hostile tribes (Chua 2018), where group membership now goes well beyond shared party loyalty and political preferences, and has become a form of social identity (Mason 2014), in which members of the outgroup are viewed with disdain and enmity (Iyengar et al. 2019).

Yet the emerging narrative about American partisan tribalism is riddled with puzzles. First, Americans don't seem to have become more attached to their "in-groups," but rather, only more hostile toward their partisan outgroups (Abramowitz and Webster 2018). Moreover, an increasing share of Americans do not identify with either party (Pew 2016). And there is little evidence that Americans' attitudes or policy preferences on specific issues have actually diverged over time (Fiorina 2017). Rather, it appears that individuals who describe themselves as conservatives have sorted themselves into the Republican Party, and those who describe themselves as liberals have found their way to the Democrats—a phenomenon known as partisan sorting (Levendusky 2009). It is not clear why this type of sorting should lead people to view members of the out-party as someone who would make a bad neighbor or unsuitable spouse for their child.

Furthermore, while voting behavior in Congress, as measured by roll-call voting scores, has become increasingly polarized (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008), we do not see a similar bimodal distribution, either in presidential voting or in estimates of ideology, across Congressional districts (Rodden 2015). Moreover, one cannot claim that the parties have become ideologically more cohesive or homogeneous over time. On the contrary, at the same moment that tribal hostilities across parties appear to be growing, the tribes seem to be in a

competition with one another to see which can be the first to collapse from internal division. Tea-partiers and now Trumpist populists have gone into battle with establishment Republicans, and Democratic Socialists now hope to upend mainstream Democrats.

American tribalism becomes even more puzzling when we place it in comparative perspective, and consider time-honored theories of party competition. The United States has the purest two-party system of any industrialized country. Classic theories suggest that two-party systems encourage the parties to adopt converging platforms. According to Anthony Downs: the number of parties in existence molds the political views of rising generations, thereby influencing their positions on the [left-right] scale. In a [majoritarian system], since a two-party system is encouraged and the two parties usually converge, voters' tastes may become relatively homogenous in the long run; whereas the opposite effect may occur in a proportional representation structure. (1957, 124–25)

Indeed, building on variants of this logic, a large empirical literature purports to show that the American political parties are ideologically more similar to one another than are parties in most other countries, and that in majoritarian democracies with winner-take-all districts and relatively few parties, the parties are closer together, on average, than in countries with multi-party systems.

Yet this observation, and the conceptualization of “polarization” on which it is based, seems far removed from the kind of social and affective polarization now being described in the United States, the UK, and Canada. And it is difficult to find media or academic portrayals of Germany, with its multi-party system, as riven with ideological hatred between tribal adherents of the CDU and SPD, or in Sweden between the Conservative Alliance parties and the red-green coalition. In Germany and Austria, the mainstream parties of left and right enter into Grand coalitions that would be unthinkable in the UK or the United States. In the Netherlands, rather than being consumed with mutual hostility, most of the parties are quite open to the prospect of

forming coalitions with one another, and governing coalitions often contain odd ideological bedfellows.

In this essay, I explore the idea that these puzzles can be solved by letting go of the understanding of polarization as the movement of parties and their voters away from one another on a single, coherent all-encompassing left-right ideological dimension. We must understand that in advanced industrial democracies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the idea of unidimensional political competition is a fiction that is sometimes analytically useful, and sometimes not. In the study of ideological, social, and affective polarization, it may have led us astray. It seems axiomatic that polarization involves a single, over-arching dimension of conflict, and that multiple cross-cutting dimensions should help to reduce polarization. This essay argues the opposite. It explores the notion that the ideological distance between the parties' platforms, and between their voters, is better understood as the distance between the parties in a multi-dimensional cartesian coordinate system.

To fix ideas, I focus on two dimensions: economic and social. However, the basic logic applies if we add additional dimensions, for example related to environmental protection, immigration, or free trade. Over the course of the last century, with the rise of demands for racial equality, the women's movement, concerns about environmental degradation, and more recently, fears about immigration and globalization, activists with strong preferences for changes from the status quo have pressured parties to adopt new positions, and the platforms of existing parties have diverged in areas where they were previously indistinguishable. This essay explores what happens when voters' preferences are multi-dimensional; that is, when preferences on the dominant dimension of conflict—say economic redistribution—are not highly correlated with those on the newly politicized dimension—say social issues.

I argue that if preferences are sufficiently multi-dimensional in a two-party system, when the parties take divergent positions on a new issue dimension, even if voters' preferences don't change at all, the average voter can end up a bit further from the most proximate of the two parties, and substantially further from her non-proximate party in the two-dimensional space. Thus, as parties take divergent platforms on new issues, but the number of parties is constrained to two, voters perceive both parties as moving further away in the two-dimensional space.

However, this phenomenon is far more muted in a multi-party system, where parties are likely to spread themselves out in the multi-dimensional issues space. Instead of viewing a party system like that of Sweden or the Netherlands as a set of points on a single line from communist to far-right, I view the parties as taking different mixtures of positions in the multi-dimensional space. If we imagine two societies with identical multi-dimensional preferences—one with a two-party system and the other with a multi-party system, voters in the multi-party democracy will be closer to their most proximate party, but also to the mean of the non-proximate parties. In other words, they perceive the partisan “outgroups” to be closer than voters in two-party democracies.

This perspective helps shed light on several of the puzzles of polarization described above. It helps explain why American voters have come to view partisan outgroups as extremely distant over the course of recent decades, while growing no closer to their ingroup, even though on many individual political issues, Americans have not grown further apart. It may also explain why an increasing number of voters feel close to neither party. Instead of interpreting the catch-all left-right scale used in survey research as a voter's placement of themselves and the parties on a single dimension of conflict, we can fruitfully understand it as an attempt by the survey respondent at a dimension-reduction exercise—an effort to convert locations in a multi-

dimensional cartesian coordinate system into a single vector. Consistent with this perspective, as the parties' platforms and reputations have diverged on new issues, the average American voter has come to see their most proximate party as moving slightly further away, while seeing the least proximate party as having moved much further away. This phenomenon may be at the heart of the rise of American-style affective and social polarization.

Next, I examine cross-national data. In contrast with the traditional unidimensional notion that two-party democracies tend to converge to the center and multi-party democracies tend toward ideological extremes, I show that in contrast with other countries, Americans perceive their parties as extremely far apart. Furthermore, it appears that more generally, countries with highly proportional electoral systems and multi-party systems perceive their parties to be closer together than do voters in majoritarian democracies with fewer parties.

This first step in this argument is to explore the changing issue politics of industrialized countries since World War II, and the extent to which the evolution of party platforms is shaped by political geography and electoral institutions. Next, I take a closer look at what this means for voters' perceptions of the parties' platforms, first in two-party systems and then in multi-party systems. Finally, I examine the evolution of those perceptions in the United States, and then in a larger sample of industrialized countries.

### **Geography, Issue Evolution, and Electoral Rules**

This essay argues that most of what Americans refer to as partisan polarization is the result of two parties adopting divergent platforms on new dimensions of political conflict. This argument has much in common with Layman and Carsey's (2002) notion of "conflict extension," the portrayal of multi-dimensional politics in the United States by Miller and Schofield (2003,

2008), and the multi-dimensional approach to issue politics taken by Ahler and Broockman (2018). These scholars recognize that many voters maintain heterogeneous mixtures of preferences that do not fit neatly into the bundles offered by the two parties. Influential elites and activists, however, push the parties to adopt divergent positions on new issues. Opponents of abortion, for example, push the Republicans to take anti-abortion positions, and supporters of abortion rights push the Democrats to adopt pro-choice positions. Immigration opponents enlist the Republicans to their cause, and advocates enlist the Democrats.

But why do the parties in majoritarian democracies end up with the specific bundles of positions that have emerged in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? The bundles of platforms offered by the mainstream parties of left and right in the UK, Canada, Australia, and the United States are quite similar. This is remarkable, since there is no good philosophical or intellectual reason why gay rights and high taxes, for instance, “go together.” Indeed, they are not bundled together in most European multi-party systems, each of which features one or more party, often with roots in classical Liberalism, that promotes freedom in both the economic and social realm. And as demonstrated by the welfare chauvinism of European radical right parties, there is no particular reason to bundle anti-welfare state and anti-immigration positions. And it is even less clear why defense of the welfare state and global free trade should be bundled together by parties of the left.

Why exactly have elites pushed parties of the “left” in majoritarian democracies to advocate for redistribution and the welfare state, cosmopolitan social values, racial diversity, freer immigration, environmental protection, support for the knowledge economy, and global free trade? And why has the “right” come to support lower taxes, traditional social values, nativism, the natural resource industry, traditional manufacturing, and most recently,

protectionism? It is difficult to understand the evolution of these bundles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century without understanding the political geography of industrialized societies (Rodden 2019).

The story starts with the mobilization of the urban industrial working class in the era of heavy industrialization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Labor parties in Europe, the UK, and Australasia became advocates of urban workers around the turn of the century. The Democrats transformed themselves into such a party a few decades later under FDR, as did the CCF and then the NDP in Canada. By the 1950s, these parties of the left were predominantly urban parties.

Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as described by Dalton (1996) and Inglehart (1990), a host of new issues emerged. Above all, activists in the environmental and women's movements demanded changes to the status quo, and traditionalists pushed back. In the proportional democracies of Europe, new parties like the Greens emerged, and existing parties repositioned themselves in the multi-dimensional issue space. Preferences on these new issues were correlated with population density, with urban activists and voters taking more progressive positions, while exurban and rural activists and voters took more traditionalist positions. In majoritarian democracies, the parties of the left had already become dominant in urban districts during the era of heavy industry, and exurban and rural districts had become the core support bastions of the right. Thus, it was Labor and Democratic incumbents who were pressured by activists to promote progressive social and environmental positions, and incumbent legislators of the right who felt pressure to adopt traditionalist views.

The correlation between population density and “cosmopolitan” social views is quite pronounced in many societies. While the social upheavals that started in the 1960s led parties of the left and right to become diverse urban- versus non-urban coalitions in majoritarian



democracies, those same upheavals led to greater differentiation of the parties in the multi-dimensional issue space in the proportional electoral systems of Europe in the subsequent decades. For instance, Socialists and Social Democrats often maintained their emphasis on workers, while Greens and other parties courted urban youth and educated cosmopolitans. But in the majoritarian democracies, existing parties of the left took on both roles, slowly becoming parties not just of urban workers, but also parties of urban cosmopolitans and environmentalists.

Race and the struggle for civil rights played an especially important role in this type of multi-dimensional politics in the United States. Initially, as the Democrats came to embrace an agenda that elevated the interests of urban workers during the New Deal, they also supported an agenda of racial oppression in the South. This slowly changed, however, via the geographic mechanism I have described. African-American industrial workers became an important part of the Democrats' constituency in the urban Congressional districts of the North, and they pressed Democratic Congressional incumbents and challengers to adopt key early elements of the civil rights agenda, thus setting the seeds for a very slow transformation of the Democratic Party from a position of racial oppression—favored by its rural Southern base—to a racially progressive agenda favored by a segment of its burgeoning new Northern urban base (Schickler 2016).

In addition to race and the rise of social and environmental issues that Ronald Inglehart (1990) has referred to as “post-material,” issue politics have also been affected by an important economic transformation documented in this volume in the chapter by Carles Boix, among others: the rise of the globalized knowledge economy. While many urban centers have entered into a long decline during the era of globalization and deindustrialization, others have emerged as wealthy centers of knowledge-based industries. In addition to socially progressive attitudes, knowledge economy workers have developed sector-based interests in global free trade and

relatively easy movement of people across borders. In Europe's multi-party systems, the interests of highly educated urban knowledge economy employees have been taken up by various parties of the left, right, and center. But in majoritarian democracies, as with cosmopolitan social issues, activists looking for political allies have turned to the parties that had already gained dominance in cities. Thus, parties of the "left" have become rather incongruous advocates for poor service workers as well as for investments in universities and scientific research, immigration, and free trade.

Meanwhile, parties of the right—having built up a dominant position in exurbs and rural areas—have been mobilized as advocates for economic activities that take place outside of city centers. This includes not only agriculture and natural resource extraction, but in recent decades, manufacturing. In several majoritarian countries, globalization skeptics in areas that are struggling to maintain a manufacturing base have turned to mainstream parties of the right. In the United States, the mainstream party of the right has turned to protectionism, and the Tories in the UK have embraced Brexit. In the UK and Australia, the urban Labor party advocates for the rights of immigrants, and the rural party feels pressure to adopt nativist positions due to electoral competition from smaller nativist parties, UKIP and One Nation. Due to a combination of 1) efforts to stave off losses to upstart far-right parties, and 2) hostile take-overs due to primaries and other such mechanisms described by Rosenbluth and Shapiro in this volume, parties of the right in majoritarian democracies have begun to embrace much of the agenda of European far-right parties.

As a result of all this, the activation of new issue dimensions has had a pronounced geographic expression. In industrialized majoritarian democracies, including the United States, Britain, France, Australia, and Canada, there is a strong—and in some cases rapidly growing—

correlation between population density and the vote shares of left parties (Rodden 2019). The key claim of this essay is that these changes in issue politics are responsible for the rise of social polarization in the United States and other majoritarian countries, but even though many of the same issues have been politicized in proportional European democracies, the implications for social polarization are more subdued.

### **Polarization and Multi-Dimensional Politics**

We are accustomed to thinking of social polarization as a unidimensional concept. Indeed, in much of the literature, and many of the chapters in this volume, the focus is on economic policy. It seems intuitive that a polarized society is one where preferences on a wide variety of issues are highly correlated, such that, for instance, those with socially liberal preferences also have economically liberal preferences. And we might suspect that, to the extent that these preferences overlap with party membership, race, and geography, this single overarching ideological dimension starts to become a salient social identity that evokes basic in-group/out-group dynamics that facilitate hostility. It is difficult, at first, to grasp the notion that social polarization might emerge not only in spite of, but *because of*, the fact that individuals' preferences in different issue areas are not highly correlated.

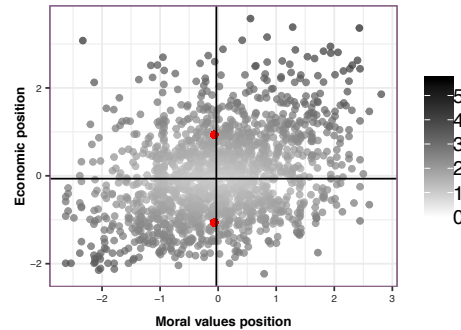
To see how this might be the case, let us examine Americans' attitudes on two dimensions of conflict: economic and moral. In joint work with Aina Gallego, using the American National Election Study, we have generated scales of economic and moral issue preferences. The items tap into the core substantive content of the economic and moral dimensions as defined in previous studies (Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014; Feldman and Johnston 2014; Treier and Hillygus 2009). The scales are normalized to have mean zero and a

standard deviation of 1. Each panel in Figure 1 displays the moral scale on the horizontal axis and the economic scale on the vertical axis. As in the studies cited above, the scales are only weakly correlated (around .20). Around 58 percent of the population is not “cross-pressured”: that is, they have preferences to the right or left of the median on both dimensions. The remaining 42 percent of the population has preferences either to the left of the economic median and to the right of the moral median, or to the right of the economic median but to the left of the moral median. In other words, public opinion can be characterized as multi-dimensional.

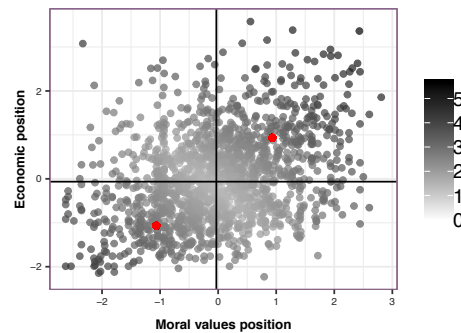
The idea behind Figure 1 is that each voter has a location in the two-dimensional cartesian coordinate system created by these issue scales. The parties then offer platforms at specific locations. By all accounts, in the 1970s, the Democrats and Republicans had distinctive economic platforms, but their platforms on moral issues like abortion and gay rights were indistinguishable. In the 1976 presidential election between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, for instance, it was unclear whether an anti-abortion moral conservative should vote for the Republican or Democratic candidate. This situation is captured by the hypothetical platforms displayed in the top panel of Figure 1 in red, where the parties’ platforms are symmetrically arranged, one standard deviation away from the median voter on the economic dimension, but each party offers an identical platform at the position of the median voter on the moral dimension. We can then measure the distance between the parties—2 units in the first example—as well as the distance between each individual and each of the two parties. The shading of the dots in the top panel of Figure 1 corresponds to the distance from each individual to the *least proximate* of the two parties.

**Figure 1:**  
**Three Examples of Party Systems: Two Potential Dimensions of Political Conflict**

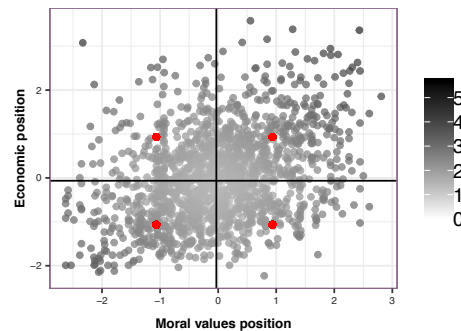
**Example 1: Two-party system, one dimension**



**Example 2: Two-party system, two dimensions**



**Example 3: Four-Party System**



Next, let us consider a situation in which the parties also develop divergent platforms on the moral values issue dimension. In the United States, for example, while maintaining divergent economic platforms, the parties began to also take clearly opposed positions on issues like gender, abortion, and the role of religion in the 1980s. To capture this type of platform shift, in the second panel of Figure 1, the parties' platforms are symmetrically arranged, one standard

deviation from the position of the median voter, on *both* dimensions. With this change in platforms, the distance between the parties in the Cartesian plane increases from 2 to 2.8, even though the parties' platforms are unchanged on the economic dimension. Moreover, as indicated by the shading of the dots, the average voter is now further away from her least proximate party. In other words, the party system has become, in an important sense, more polarized.

**Figure 2:  
Euclidian Distance from Non-Proximate Parties, Three Examples**

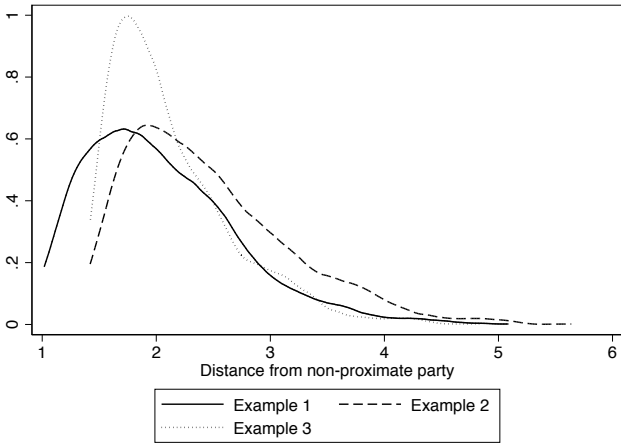


Figure 2 provides kernel densities showing the distribution of individual distances from the non-proximate political party for each example. The solid line corresponds to the first example, where parties take diverging platforms on only a single dimension of conflict, while the dashed line corresponds to the second example, with platform divergence on both dimensions. After the platform shift, the vast majority of individuals is now further from the non-proximate party, and the average voter experiences an increase in ideological distance from the non-proximate party of around .41 units.

This is a very simple representation of the impact of multi-dimensional politics on political polarization in a two-party system. The story is quite different, however, if multiple

political parties in a European-style system of proportional representation are able to occupy a wider diversity of coordinates in the two-dimensional space (see Laver and Schofield 1990). To capture this, the third example in Figure 1 is a four-party system, where parties are located symmetrically around the median in both directions. The first thing to notice about this arrangement is that voters are much closer to their most proximate party. The average distance to the most proximate party is 1.04 in the first example, and 1.08 in the second example, but 0.82 in the third example. This is a simple way to comprehend what is perhaps the most intuitive advantage of a multi-party system: voters can find a party that comes closer to their ideal point (see, for example, Lijphart 2012).

There is an additional advantage. In example three, in terms of Euclidean proximity, the average voter is also closer to her second-ranked party than in either example 1 or example 2. Even the third-ranked party is closer to the average voter than the less proximate of the two parties in example 2. Clearly, averaging over the three non-proximate parties, voters are substantially closer to their partisan “enemies” in the four-party case. This is captured by the dotted kernel density in Figure 2, which displays the distribution of the average distance from the three non-proximate parties across individuals. By this measure, the multi-party system is less polarized than the two-party examples—even less so than the two-party case with only one dimension of political conflict (example 1).

These stylized examples provide a logic whereby voters in majoritarian systems with relatively few political parties might come to see the parties as increasingly polarized over time as parties take divergent platforms on new issues, even if the parties’ platforms on the initial dimension of conflict, and the voters’ political views on both dimensions, remain the same. And

this logic also sheds light on the possible role of proportional representation as an antidote to polarization.

### **Multi-Dimensional Politics and the Growth of Polarization in the United States**

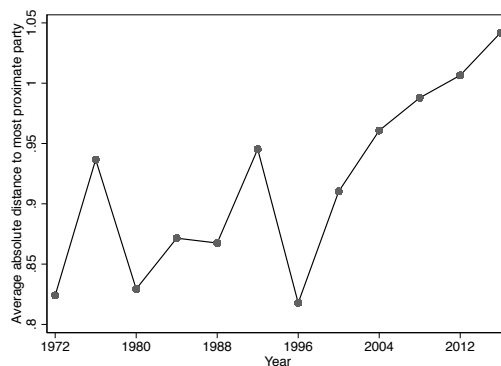
In empirical research on American and comparative polarization, survey researchers rely heavily on questions that ask respondents to place themselves, and the parties, on an ideological scale from far-left to far-right. Researchers typically interpret this scale as straightforward assessments of positions on a single, all-encompassing left-right dimension of conflict. But in all likelihood, respondents are assessing the parties' platform, and thinking of their own ideological placement, as comprised of a combination of issues like taxation, redistribution, race, cultural and social issues, environmental protection, and immigration policy. As a result, it might be more fruitful to interpret these scales as efforts by the survey respondent to collapse these multiple issue dimensions into a single vector. The perceived distance between party *A* and party *B*, or between one of the parties and the survey respondent, then, can be understood as the respondent's assessment of the Euclidean distance between the two parties in *n*-dimensional space.

With this understanding, as the parties' policy platforms, and perhaps more slowly their policy reputations, have grown apart since the 1970s on issues like race and religion, and as social polarization has risen, we should expect to see that the average voter perceives the ideologically *most proximate* party not as moving *closer* as ideological sorting and tribalism set in, but if anything, moving further away. Moreover, we should expect that respondents see the *least proximate* party as moving substantially further away.



Since 1972, the American National Election Study (ANES) has asked respondents to place both of the major parties, and themselves, on a 7-point scale. I calculate the absolute difference between each individual's self-placement and his or her assessment of the more *proximate* party, as well as the absolute difference between the self-placement and the assessment of the more *distant* party. I then take averages over all respondents for each presidential election year. In Figures 3 and 4, I plot both of these quantities over time.

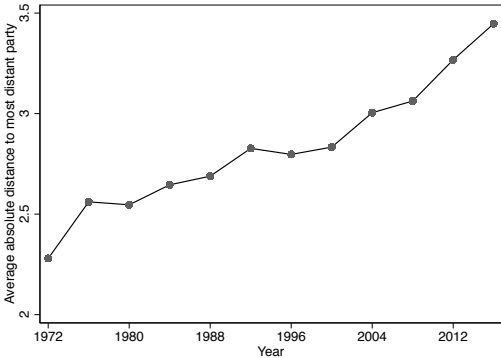
**Figure 3: Average Absolute Ideological Distance Between Respondent and the Most Proximate Party, ANES, 1972-2016**



It is clear that substantial partisan sorting took place over the period from 1972 to the present, whereby those who call themselves conservatives have become more likely to also call themselves Republicans, and report voting for Republican candidates, while those who call themselves liberals have become more likely to identify with and vote for Democrats (Levendusky 2009, Fiorina 2017). But Figure 3 reveals that during this period, voters have not come to see their most proximate party as ideologically closer today than they did in the 1970s. In fact, this distance has grown, especially since 1996, and is higher today (1.04) than in 1972 (.82).

But as demonstrated in Figure 4, the most striking change has been in the perceived distance between American survey respondents and their non-proximate party. This distance has grown substantially over time. On the 7-point scale, the average ANES respondent saw their most distant party as 2.28 units away in 1972, while today, the distance has grown to 3.45.

**Figure 4: Average Absolute Ideological Distance Between Respondent and the Most *Distant* Party, ANES, 1972-2016**



In short, as parties have taken divergent platforms on a larger number of non-economic issues, Americans have come to view their partisan out-group as ideologically very distant. When asked to place a party on a left-right scale, voters are likely thinking not only of the party’s elites and its written platform, but also its voters. It is not surprising that this growing perception of ideological distance might spill over into a broader social animosity. If one sees the other side as an advocate of baby-killing or placing children in cages, it is a short step to see them as potentially bad neighbors or unsuitable spouses for one’s children. While some of the more interesting constructs for measuring social polarization in recent work are not available over time, Figure 5 is based on so-called “feeling thermometers” in the ANES, where 100 is a “very warm or favorable feeling” toward the group, and 0 is “a very cold or unfavorable feeling.” I simply generate a dummy that takes on the value 1 for all respondents who rate at least one of the parties less than 25, and calculate means for each year.

**Figure 5: Share of the Population with “Quite Cold or Unfavorable Feelings” about One or Both Parties, ANES, 1972-2016**

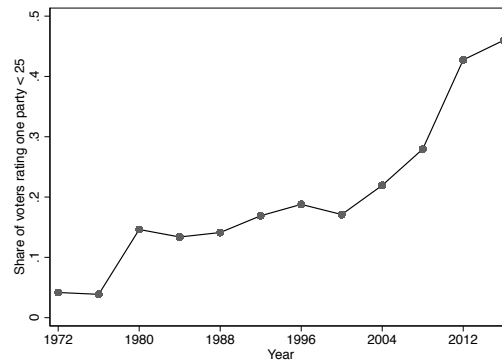


Figure 5 looks quite similar to Figure 4. Only around 5 percent of Americans had very cold feelings toward members of one of the parties in the 1970s. By 1996 it was around 19 percent, and today, 46 percent of the population feels this way.

Note that as Hacker and Pierson point out in this volume, there is a broad consensus among political scientists that American polarization since the early 1990s is asymmetric in the sense that Republican elites and elected officials have moved further to the right than Democrats have moved to the left. However, in terms of perceived ideological distance from and affective hostility toward the out-party, polarization appears to be somewhat more symmetric. Democrats and Republicans are rather similar in their growing sense of alienation from the out-party.

### **Comparative Analysis**

In short, Americans have come to see the parties as increasingly ideologically distant in recent decades, and this has been closely linked with an increasing hostility toward partisan out-groups. But this creates quite a puzzle for the dominant unidimensional model used by political scientists. Two-party systems, we are told, should always be more centrist than multi-party

systems. The key insight of this essay, however, is that a multi-dimensional starting point for thinking about party systems and ideological distance yields precisely the opposite intuition. As new dimensions of conflict are added over time in a system where the number of parties remains fixed at two, the Euclidean distance between the parties often increases, and for most voters, the Euclidean distance between themselves and the two parties also increases.

In a multi-party system, in contrast, parties should be able to occupy a larger part of the multi-dimensional issue space. As a result, the average Euclidian distance between the parties should be *smaller*, and voters should be closer to both their most proximate party and the average of the non-proximate parties. A party system like that in Sweden is best understood not as a series of points on a line offering a range of tax rates from 100 percent to zero, but rather, as a set of coordinates in multi-dimensional space. For instance, several parties on the Swedish right push for lower taxation and espouse free market principles, but the Center Party focuses on the needs of agricultural producers and has an environmentalist agenda. The Moderate Party favors gay marriage, European Union membership, and the strengthening of the welfare state. The Liberals have at times espoused more liberal immigration policies than the parties of the left. The Sweden Democrats, on the other hand, support greater investment in the welfare state, especially for the elderly, but restrictions on immigration.

Let us first proceed by quickly reviewing the expectations of the classic unidimensional perspective, and the empirical literature it has spawned, and then examine an empirical approach based on the notion that catch-all party- and self-placements in comparative surveys should be thought of not as generating a single policy line, but a vector created by coordinates in  $n$ -dimensional space.

Following from the insights of Anthony Downs (1957), the starting point for the political economy literature on electoral rules and polarization is summarized in Gary Cox’s seminal paper: “The standard spatial model begins by assuming that electoral competition can fruitfully be modeled as taking place along a single left-right ideological dimension” (Cox 1990: 908). Cox treats parties as office-maximizers, and demonstrates that equilibria in ordinary plurality systems tend toward a clustering of the parties in middle of the ideological spectrum, in the same spirit as the Hotelling (1929). The equilibria in proportional systems are such that “(1) each party has a fairly well-defined and narrow ideological appeal and (2) parties are dispersed fairly widely over the ideological spectrum” (p. 922). This leads to the hypothesis that declining district magnitude is associated with convergence of party platforms to the center. A series of formal models based on different assumptions and modelling strategies—all in the context of a unidimensional understanding of politics—yield broadly similar insights (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Calvo and Hellwig 2011; Iaryczower and Mattozzi 2013; Matakos, Troumpounis, and Xefteris 2015). In these papers, smaller district magnitude, and hence higher levels of electoral disproportionality, place centripetal pressure on the largest parties. Proportional representation, and larger numbers of parties, create centrifugal incentives, and result in non-centrist parties.

To assess the ideological spread of parties, scholars have used an index devised by Dalton (2008) that sums over deviations of each party  $j$ ’s ideological position,  $p_j$ , from the party system average,  $\bar{p}$ , weighted by the party’s vote share,  $V_j$ , as follows:

$$DI = \sqrt{\sum_j V_j \left( \frac{p_j - \bar{p}}{.5} \right)^2}$$

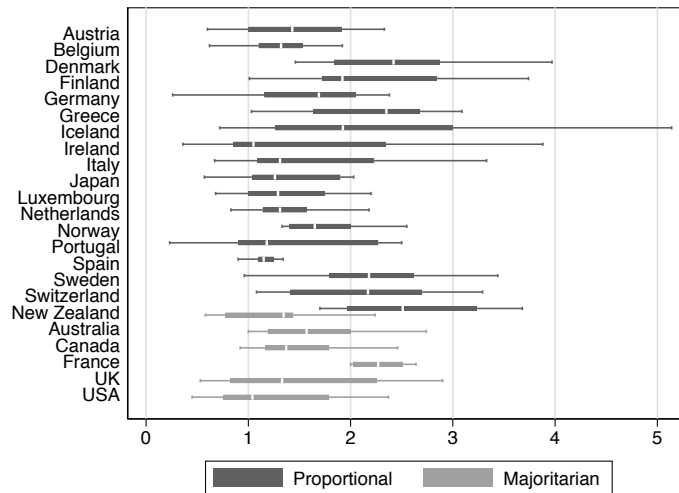
In order to estimate  $p_j$ , Dalton (2008) recommends using the average assessment of survey respondents in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, each of whom is asked to place each party in their country on an 11-point scale from left to right (0 to 10). Makatos et al (2015) use data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), which relies on text analysis of party manifestos to make assessments about how the parties line up on a single, all-encompassing dimension of conflict.

The advantage of using the CMP data is that one can examine a panel of OECD countries covering a long period starting in 1959. Based on the data assembled by Makatos et al (2015), Figure 6 provides a box plot by country of the Dalton index using CMP data from 1959 to 2007, employing a blunt differentiation between majoritarian and proportional democracies.<sup>2</sup> On average, this measure of partisan spread is lower in majoritarian democracies. France, with its multi-round elections, and Australia, with its system of ranked-choice voting, look more similar to proportional democracies, but according to this approach, the United States, Canada, and the UK have been consistently among the least polarized democracies in the world, and they remain so today.

**Figure 6: Partisan Ideological Spread, Dalton Index Applied to CMP Data, 1959-2007**

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<sup>2</sup> Japan and Ireland are controversial cases, coded here as proportional.



Note the separate observations in Figure 6 for New Zealand, which distinguish between the period before and after the transition to proportional representation in 1996. With this measurement approach, New Zealand’s parties became much more spread out after adopting proportional representation. Makatos et al (2015) focus on the relationship between electoral disproportionality and partisan spread (which they refer to as “polarization”), and it is robust whether one examines cross-section or time-series variation. There is also a relatively strong relationship between a larger number of effective political parties and this same measure of partisan spread. These same relationships can be discerned if one uses the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems to take a survey-based approach to measuring partisan spread rather than data on party manifestos. The lowest levels of estimated partisan spread appear to be in the majoritarian countries: The United States, Canada, Australia, and the UK are among the least centrifugal industrialized democracies by this measure, along with Ireland and Japan.<sup>3</sup>

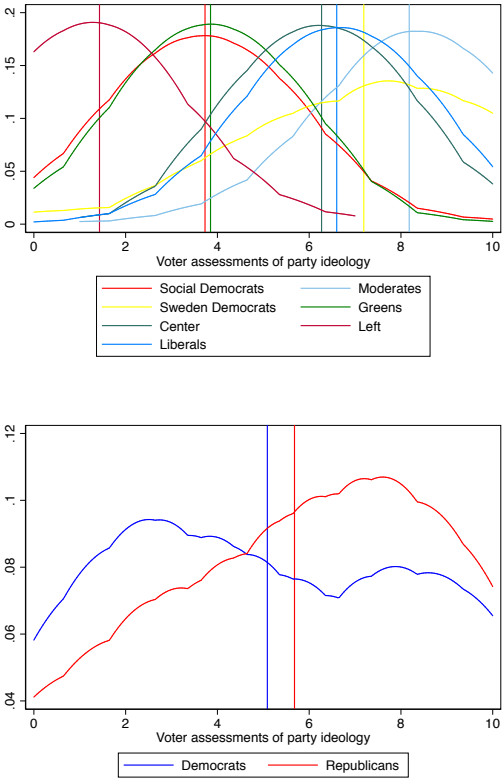
Remarkably, whether one uses the manifesto- or survey-based approach with a unidimensional mindset, one draws the conclusion that Sweden, with its multi-party system, has

<sup>3</sup> Note that the correlation between ENP and the Dalton survey-based polarization measure does not hold up in the larger sample of non-OECD countries in the CSES.

one of the most centrifugal party systems, and the United States, in spite all of the talk about polarization, has the *most centripetal* party system in the industrialized world.

On its own terms, this basic finding is quite intuitive if we imagine there is a single dimension of electoral conflict. Relative to majoritarian democracies with two or three internally heterogeneous parties, proportional representation can be understood as allowing extremists on the left and right to run under separate party labels. Thus, the extremes of the policy platforms offered by the parties are pulled outward. For instance, let us examine CSES data for Sweden and the United States. The first panel of Figure 7 provides kernel densities of voters' ideological assessments of the main Swedish parties in 2014, and the second panel does the same for the United States in 2012. The vertical lines correspond to the means from which the Dalton Index are calculated.

**Figure 7: Voter Assessments of Party Ideology, Sweden 2014 and the United States 2012**





According to the Dalton Index, Sweden can be thought of as more widely spread, or “polarized” according to the contributors to this literature, than the United States because the means for the two American parties are relatively close to the center, while those for the Swedish parties are spread much more widely across the ideological spectrum. The United States simply does not have a separate party that voters, on average, view as having an ideological position that is far from the center, like the Vänsterpartiet (Left Party) or the Sweden Democrats.

Figure 7 makes it clear, however, that the party means in the United States mask striking heterogeneity in the assessments of American voters about the ideological locations of their political parties. In fact, a rather large density of Americans perceives the Democratic Party to be extremely liberal, and a very large density of Americans perceives the Republican Party to be extremely conservative. However, the overall mean assessments are moderate because there are also a countervailing, non-trivial group of Americans who view the Democrats as conservative, and the Republicans as liberal. In contrast to the relatively tight distributions seen in Sweden, the American parties are different things to different people. Even though the overall means are close to one another, as we have seen, many American voters view the two parties as far from the center, far from one another, and far from themselves. The same phenomenon can be seen in other majoritarian democracies. While the means of voter assessments of party platforms are closer together than in proportional democracies, the standard deviations are substantially larger.

Thus, the small difference in party means estimated in the United States are misleading. For the United States, the difference between the mean assessment of the Democrats’ ideology and that of the Republicans in the 2012 survey is only .59. However, if we calculate the absolute value of the difference in assessed ideology between the two parties for each individual, we see something radically different. The modal respondent perceives a 10-point difference between

the Democrats and Republicans. If we take the average of those differences across all respondents, the perceived difference is actually 5.4. This is almost as high as the six-point average perceived difference between the far-right Sweden Democrats and the far-left Vänsterpartiet.

Let us take this logic to the larger group of OECD countries. For each individual in each wave of the CSES, we can take the absolute difference between the perceived ideological location of the largest party and the perceived ideological location of every other party, and take a weighted average of these differences, where the weights are the parties' legislative vote shares. This tells us how spread out each individual perceives the party system to be. Figure 8 plots country means of this index against the effective number of political parties, with majoritarian democracies indicated with red markers.

**Figure 8: Voter Assessments of Party System Polarization and the Effective Number of Parties, CSES Modules 3 and 4**

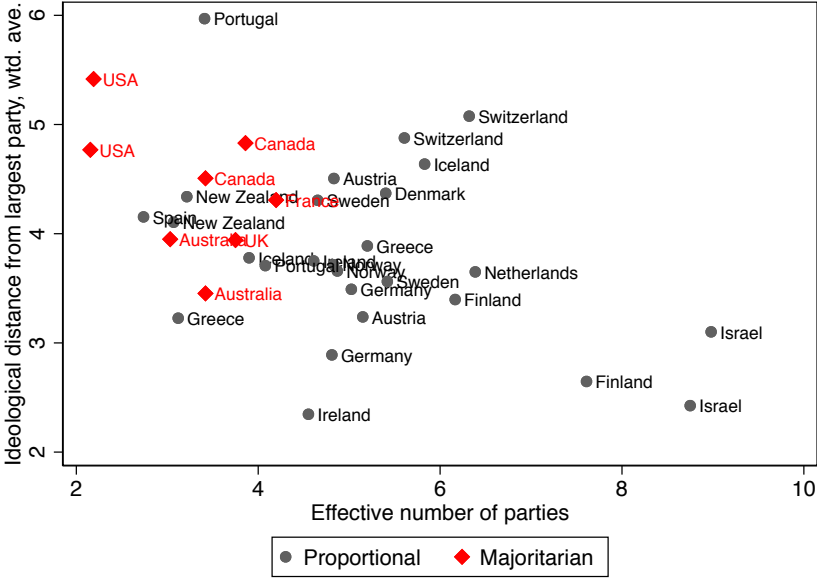


Figure 8 suggests that if anything, voters in countries with fewer political parties perceive the parties' platforms to be *more* spread out, and in contrast to the Dalton index, Americans are among the respondents who perceive their parties to be the furthest apart. Part of the reason for the disjuncture between the inferences we might draw from examining differences in party means and individual-level absolute differences between party placements is that respondents are not providing unbiased assessments of the parties' platforms. In addition to assessments of the parties, the CSES also asks voters to place *themselves* on the same unidimensional 11-point scale. In the United States, there is a U-shaped relationship between one's self-assessment and one's perception of difference between the parties. Americans who rate themselves as very conservative, or very liberal, perceive a very large difference between the parties, while those who see themselves as in the ideological middle perceive a smaller (but still substantial) difference.

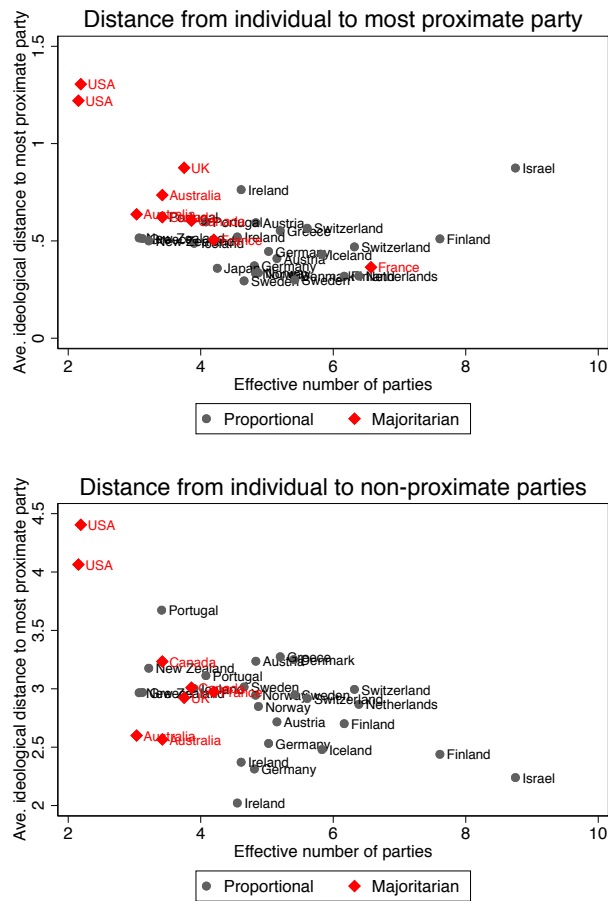
It is useful to calculate for each respondent, as in the ANES analysis above, the distance between their self-placement and their assessment of each party's location. We can then calculate the average perceived ideological distance, within each country, to the most proximate party. Next, we can calculate the average perceived distance of each individual to all of the non-proximate parties, weighting these distances by party vote shares. The first indicator gives us a sense of the extent to which voters believe a party comes close to offering their preferred ideological position. We might think of this as the representativeness of the party system. The second indicator tells us how far away respondents believe the *other* parties to be. Thus, it provides an intuitive alternative measure of party system polarization: the further the ideological distance of the average voter from their non-proximate parties, the more polarized is the party system. We can conclude that a party system is polarized if a large number of voters view

relatively large, non-proximate political parties as ideologically far away. A system is less polarized if voters perceive the non-proximate parties to be closer. Even if an objective measure of party platforms, like the text analysis of the Comparative Manifesto Project, suggests that parties' platforms are close together, voters might perceive the non-proximate party as very far away from themselves.

This approach has a methodological advantage over the Dalton index in that it is unaffected by possible voter misunderstandings of the 11-point scale. A surprisingly large number of Americans who rated themselves as “very conservative” also rated the Democrats as very conservative and the Republicans as very liberal. It is plausible that they either switched the parties, or more likely, believed a higher number on all the scales corresponds to a more leftist position. Such mistakes would not affect a measure based on absolute differences between the self-assessment and the perceived party platform, or between perceived platforms, as long as respondents understand the direction of the scale to be the same for both the respondent and all of the parties.

This conceptualization of polarization also leads to very different cross-country characterizations than the Dalton Index. The average American respondent in 2012 perceived the most proximate party to be around 1.3 ideological units (on the 11-point scale) away from themselves, and they perceived the non-proximate party to be 4.4 units away. In Sweden, the average voter perceived their most proximate party to be only .3 units away, while the weighted average distance of the non-proximate parties was 2.97. Swedish respondents feel not only closer than American respondents to the party they identify as closest, but they also feel closer to their non-preferred parties. In other words, when it comes to perceived ideological distance, the Swedish party system is *less* polarized than the American system.

**Figure 9: Voter Assessments of Party Distances from Themselves and the Effective Number of Parties, CSES Modules 3 and 4**



For the larger group of OECD countries in the CSES, the first panel in Figure 9 plots the average ideological distance of each respondent to the most proximate party against the effective number of political parties. Relative to other countries, American and British respondents view themselves as remarkably far from their most proximate party. And there is a rather strong relationship between the number of political parties and the ideological proximity of the closest party. Not surprisingly, in multi-party systems, voters are much more likely to identify a party with a platform that they perceive to be identical to their own.

The second panel in Figure 9 suggests that the United States is remarkably polarized relative to other countries, in that voters perceive the non-proximate party to be quite far away. Australia, with its system of compulsory voting and ranked-choice ballot procedure, is an outlier relative to other majoritarian democracies. But in contrast to the classic unidimensional political economy literature, if anything, voters perceive the parties to be further not only from one another, but also from themselves in countries with majoritarian electoral institutions, higher levels of disproportionality, and fewer political parties.

### **Perceived Ideological Distance, Geography, and Social Polarization**

As new issue dimensions have been added, it appears that American voters have come to see their partisan outgroup as moving further and further away. Lilliana Mason (2014) argues that as individuals with the same issue preferences sort into the same political party, they experience an increasing sense of the party as a social identity. This, in turn, can provoke the type of anger, mistrust, and “affective polarization” reported by Iyengar et al. (2019). As pointed out above, many of the issue dimensions that have been added over time are correlated with urban versus rural residence. Accordingly, Kathy Cramer (2016) reports a related sense of rural identity. She argues that recent support for conservative candidates in rural Wisconsin has been motivated in part by resentment toward urban elites that has rather little in the way of explicit policy content. A similar resentment of educated downtown Toronto elites seems to be part of the electoral appeal of Rob Ford in exurban and rural Ontario.

In short, polarization in majoritarian democracies has congealed as parties—pushed by activists—have bundled together a set of issues on which preferences are quite correlated with urbanization. As parties of the left have become champions of cities, and parties of the right

have become champions of exurbs and rural areas, these parties have also come to be more closely linked with distinct social and geographic identities. Legislative elections have come to feel like high-stakes battles between distinctive urban and rural policy agendas, and different identities and ways of life, with the winner determined by a handful of pivotal districts in the middle-ring suburbs.

For the most part, this pattern of polarized geographic political competition appears not to have emerged in the proportional democracies of Northern Europe. As described above, when new issue dimensions arise in multi-party proportional democracies without small winner-take-all districts, new parties enter and old parties adapt. There is no logic pushing a single mainstream party of the left to bundle all “urban” issue positions and identities into one package. Likewise, there is no logic pushing a single party of the right to bundle together the interests of high-income fiscal conservatives and those of rural traditionalists. High-income, educated, cosmopolitan professional in the knowledge economy cities of North America and Australia vote overwhelmingly for parties of the “left,” but their counterparts in European cities can choose from a far more diverse menu of choices. Some choose Green parties that coalesce with the left, and many choose Liberal or center-right parties with progressive social platforms.

As a result, European governments of the right typically contain substantial representation from the urban core of the major cities. Parliamentary elections are much less likely to take shape as winner-take-all geographic battles pitting the urban core against the countryside. In contrast, the legislative coalitions supporting Conservative governments in the UK and Canada contain virtually no urban MPs. The same is true of Republican U.S. House majorities in the United States.

European voters have a wider range of options than American voters, and as suggested in the analysis above, for most voters, there is more than one ideologically proximate party, and one's preferred party often cannot govern without forming coalitions with some less-preferred parties. Moreover, unlike many Americans who live in politically homogeneous Democratic urban neighborhoods or Republican rural areas, Europeans in all geographic settings are much more likely to live in neighborhoods where others in their immediate social network vote for, and identify with, a different party. It is possible that the type of geographic partisan segregation that has emerged in the U.S., Canada, and Britain exacerbates social polarization (Enos 2018).

Perhaps the ideological proximity of out-parties, and lower levels of geographic partisan segregation in proportional democracies, make it less likely that voters will come to view a specific party as a form of social identity, and less likely to form strong hostilities toward partisan outgroups. On the other hand, insofar as the parties of the left and right typically coalesce with the same partners, perhaps American-style social polarization merely reproduces across the broad left-right groupings.

Cross-national research on affective polarization, or “party-ism,” outside the United States is in its infancy. A recent study by Heeremans (2018) finds evidence of party-based outgroup hostility in the Netherlands, but it appears to be substantially less pronounced than in the United States. Those who identify with the Liberal Party, the VVD, for instance, have surprisingly warm feelings toward partisan outgroups. This makes sense, since the VVD has coalesced with parties of both the right and left in recent years, but Christian Democrats also report surprisingly warm feelings toward partisan outgroups. More generally, the average “feeling thermometer” (0 to 100) score given by voters of parties of the right toward parties of the left is actually above 50, and the average score given by voters of left parties toward parties



of the right is 39. In another study, Huddy, Bankert, and Davies (2018) find that the overall strength of partisanship as a social identity is lower in Sweden and the Netherlands than in the United States.

An innovative study by Westwood et al. (2018) uses behavioral games in several countries to examine the extent to which partisans treat members of their ingroup and outgroup differently. Democrats and Republicans in the United States, and supporters of Labour and the Conservatives in Britain, showed a striking willingness to discriminate against one another. However, Liberal Democrats did not discriminate against Labour, and supporters of both of the major parties are much less likely to discriminate against Liberal Democrats than against one another. It is also interesting to note that American and British respondents only punished members of the opposite major party—they did not *reward* members of their in-group.

In the same study, the results were different in Belgium, with its multi-party system. Belgian voters showed a striking favoritism toward members of their partisan ingroup. This is, perhaps, consistent with the notion that voters in multi-party systems feel closer to their most proximate parties than do voters in majoritarian democracies. And on the whole, discrimination against partisan outgroups was less pronounced than in the majoritarian democracies. Voters for the Flemish right discriminate against neither the Flemish Liberals nor the Flemish Socialists. The Francophone Socialists and Liberals—who were recently in a coalition together—do not discriminate against one another.

One of the interesting threads in each of these studies is the relative lack of evidence for social polarization involving *Liberal* parties, whose platforms are typically to the right on economic issues but to the left on social issues. And more broadly, these initial comparative studies of social polarization seem consistent with the notion that proportional democracies—

where voters perceive their out-parties as closer on average—are also less prone to social polarization. However, much work remains to be done to explore this possibility. And even if the perceived ideological and social distances between supporters of the various parties is indeed lower in Northern Europe than in Britain and its former colonies, it is plausible that this is driven not by electoral rules, but by a deeper cultural norm of cooperation and collaboration that took root in Northern Europe even before the adoption of proportional representation (Martin and Swank 2011). It is also plausible that the rise of far-right and populist parties, like the AfD in Germany, and the emergence of a cleavage between the winners and losers of globalization, is generating American-style social polarization between the traditional parties on the one hand, and the new populist parties on the other (Helbling and Jungkunz 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Elsewhere in this volume, focusing primarily on the economic dimension of conflict, Rosenbluth and Shapiro point out some dangers of proportional representation in the era of the post-industrial knowledge economy—above all, partisan fragmentation and the rise of extremist parties. This essay focuses on multiple issue dimensions, and suggests that in spite of a tendency toward fragmentation, proportional representation might have a countervailing advantage: it helps inoculate against partisan and social polarization by preventing the two-party urban-rural bundling of issue platforms and social identities that have gradually fueled the rise of partisan hostility in majoritarian democracies. The United States, which has the purest two-party system in the world, is rather striking in the extent to which its voters view the parties as ideologically distinctive from one another, and far from themselves. In the post-industrial era, as self-described socialists vie for control of the Democratic Party, and rural nativists consolidate their

control of the Republican Party, the centripetal logic of majoritarian democracy—so clear in simple one-dimensional theory—is difficult to see in practice.

Each of the industrialized majoritarian democracies has experienced some version of the same pattern of polarization, but each also has some mitigating features. Canada has largely avoided American-style nationalization of provincial politics, and maintains distinct party systems in each province. Federalism may also provide a valuable antidote to polarization in the United States, where Republican governors in extremely liberal Northeastern states, and Democratic governors of conservative states, are able to gain popularity by offering locally-crafted solutions to local problems. Perhaps ranked-choice voting changes the dynamic in Australia, as does the multi-round process in France.

The United States is, in many ways, an outlier. Most majoritarian democracies do not have strict two-party systems. There is often a persistent divide on the left in majoritarian democracies, such as that between the NDP and Liberals (and increasingly the Greens) in Canada, or between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the UK, not to mention the Scottish and Welsh parties. One might view these multi-party systems as a good thing, in that they provide voters with a greater range of choices, including some—like the Liberals in Canada and the Liberal Democrats in the UK—that might be described as “centrist.” On the other hand, voters must engage in careful strategic voting in these systems, and as long as parties can hope to exploit coordination failures among their enemies, extremist parties with broadly unpopular platforms can hope to form outright parliamentary majorities with as little as 35 percent of the vote. Such a party would have to expand its support base in order to win in a pure two-party system, or find moderate coalition partners in a proportional system, but in a multi-party

majoritarian system, extremist parties can govern alone as long as their opponents fail to coordinate against them.

In the era of backlash to globalization, wage stagnation, and inter-regional and inter-personal inequality, proportional democracies are also being put to the test. The rise of rural and post-industrial xenophobic and nativist parties, for instance, has led to considerable anxiety throughout Europe. Yet these parties, while sometimes extreme in their rhetoric, will likely be forced to moderate in order to make themselves into palatable coalition partners. Moreover, in spite of its centripetal reputation, proportional representation brings a powerful advantage: it can allow the political system to absorb the rise of new issue dimensions, from environmentalism to women's rights to nativism, without the issue-bundling and partisan identity- construction that facilitates all-encompassing American-style polarization.

At the heart of political polarization in the United States is a paradox. The parties appear to be moving further and further apart precisely because they are offering ever-more heterogeneous and incoherent bundles of platforms over time in response to their geographic bases as new issues arise. At the same moment that they appear to be implacable tribes on the cusp of civil war, they also appear to be obstreperous coalitions on the verge of collapse. While many Americans feel strong antipathy towards the more distant of the two parties, in comparison with citizens of other countries, they do not feel especially close to the most proximate party either.

A key claim in the comparative politics literature is that the number of parties in a country is a function of the number of cross-cutting cleavages—in other words, the number of distinct, salient issue dimensions in the mass public—and the extent to which the electoral system lowers barriers to entry for new parties (Amorim Neto and Cox 1997). This essay

suggests that the partisan and social polarization experienced by the United States in recent years might be a function of having a growing number of cleavages but, due to its political institutions, a fixed number of political parties.

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