

Why Can't We All Just Get Along? The Reality of a Polarized America

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Alan Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders

Abstract

According to Morris Fiorina, Americans are moderate, tolerant, and ambivalent in their political attitudes. This has always been true and it is, if anything, more true today than in the past. The culture war is almost entirely an elite phenomenon, driven by a small group of activists on the left and right who exert influence far out of proportion to their numbers. It is the elites and activists who are polarized, not the public. In this study we use data from the American National Election Studies and national exit polls to test five major claims made by Fiorina about the state of public opinion in the United States. This evidence indicates that while some of the claims of culture war proponents are overstated, there are deep divisions in America between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious voters and secular voters. These divisions are not confined to a small minority of elected officials and activists—they involve a large segment of the public and they are likely to increase in the future as a result of long-term trends affecting American society.

KEYWORDS: elections, political parties, American voter, partisanship

“Americans are closely divided, but we are not deeply divided, and we are closely divided because many of us are ambivalent and uncertain, and consequently reluctant to make firm commitments to parties, politicians, or policies. We divide evenly in elections or sit them out entirely because we instinctively seek the center while the parties and candidates hang out on the extremes (Fiorina 2005, p. ix.).”

According to Morris Fiorina, all of the talk in recent years about a culture war and growing polarization in the United States is almost completely off the mark. Americans, he argues, are moderate, tolerant, and ambivalent in their political attitudes. This has always been true and it is, if anything, more true today than in the past. The culture war is almost entirely an elite phenomenon, driven by a small group of activists on the left and right who exert influence far out of proportion to their numbers. It is the elites and activists who are polarized, not the public.

This is the central argument of *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, a book that has attracted the attention of pundits and journalists as well as scholars in the short time since its publication (Auster 2004; Brooks 2004; Muro and Berube 2004; Samuelson 2004; Mink 2004; Page 2005; Meyer 2005; Eisner 2005). The attention is understandable because Fiorina (along with his co-authors Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope) forcefully challenges the conventional wisdom among journalists and academics that the United States in the first decade of the 21st century is a nation deeply divided along partisan, geographic, and cultural lines (Broder 2000; Harwood and Murray 2002; Lawrence 2002; White 2003; Dionne 2003).

But just because someone challenges the conventional wisdom doesn't make him right. In this study we use data from the American National Election Studies and national exit polls to test five major claims made by Fiorina about the state of public opinion in the United States. This evidence indicates that while some of the claims of culture war proponents about deep political divisions among the American public have been overstated, Fiorina systematically understates the significance of these divisions. Americans may not be heading to the barricades to do battle over abortion, gay marriage and other emotionally charged issues as James Davison Hunter (1995) has suggested, but there are deep divisions between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious voters and secular voters. These divisions are not confined to a small minority of elected officials and activists—they involve a large segment of the public and they are likely to increase in the future as a result of long-term trends affecting American society.

Fiorina's Five Claims

1. Moderation

The broadest claim made by Fiorina and the one that underlies all of the others is that the American electorate is basically moderate—the electorate is closely divided but not deeply divided. Today as in the past, most Americans are ideological moderates, holding a mixture of liberal and conservative views on different issues. Even on emotionally charged issues like abortion and gay marriage, most Americans, according to Fiorina, feel ambivalent. Only a small minority strongly identify with one side or the other.

2. Partisan Polarization

While differences between Democratic and Republican identifiers on issues have increased, they are only slightly greater than in the past. Partisan polarization is largely an elite phenomenon—only a thin layer of elected officials and activists are truly polarized in their views.

3. Geographical Polarization

Cultural and political differences between red states and blue states are actually fairly small. There are strongly Republican areas in blue states and strongly Democratic areas in red states. The similarities between voters in these two sets of states are much more striking than the differences.

4. Social Cleavages

Divisions within the public based on social characteristics such as age, race, gender, and religious affiliation have been diminishing. While divisions based on religious beliefs and practices have increased, they remain modest and have not supplanted traditional economic divisions as determinants of party identification or voting behavior.

5. Partisan Gerrymandering

Growing polarization in Congress is due largely to partisan gerrymandering. The growing proportion of safe Democratic and Republican seats is not a natural phenomenon but an artificial result of the way political elites have drawn district lines in recent years to insulate themselves from meaningful competition.

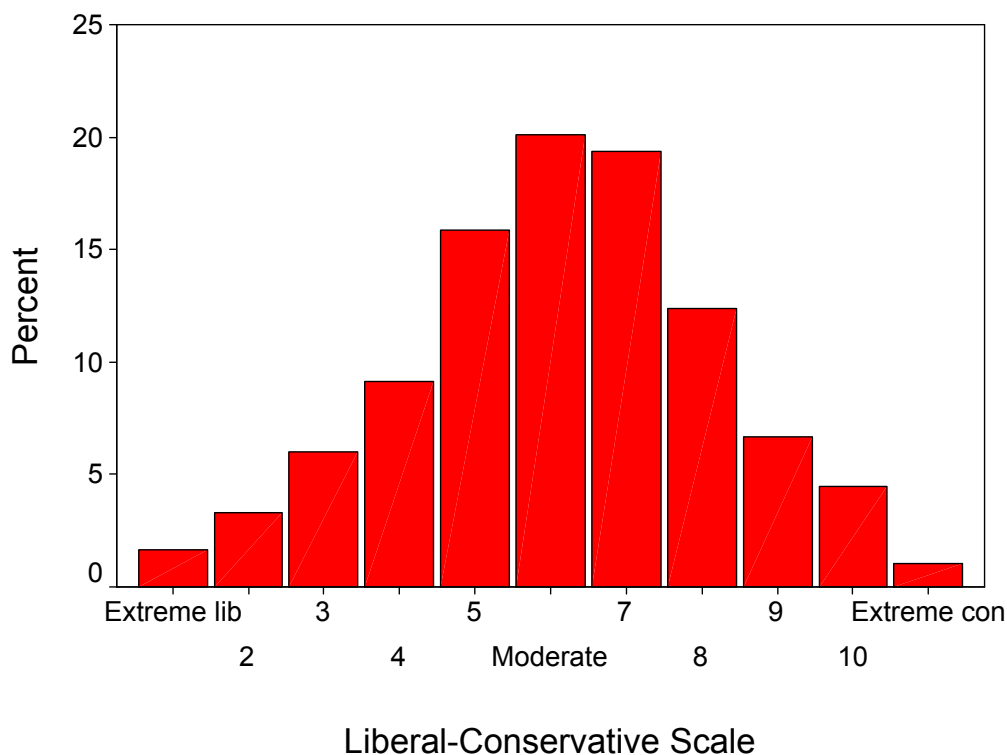
The Evidence

1. Moderation

In order to measure ideological orientations among the American public, we created a scale based on responses to 16 issues included in the 2004 National

Election Study survey. The issues ranged from government responsibility for jobs and living standards to gay marriage, health insurance, abortion, defense spending, and gun control. Scores on the original scale ranged from -16 for respondents who gave liberal responses to all 16 issues to +16 for respondents who gave conservative responses to all 16 issues. We then recoded the original 33-point scale into an 11-point scale for ease in presentation. Figure 1 displays the distribution on this 11-point liberal-conservative scale of all respondents in the 2004 NES survey.

Figure 1.
Liberal-Conservative Policy Preferences of Voters in 2004 Election



Source: 2004 National Election Study

The results in Figure 1 show that Fiorina is correct in claiming that most Americans are ideological moderates. Only a tiny percentage of respondents in the 2004 NES survey were consistent liberals or consistent conservatives. Almost half were clustered within one unit of the scale's mid-point, meaning that they took about as many conservative positions as liberal positions. These results are

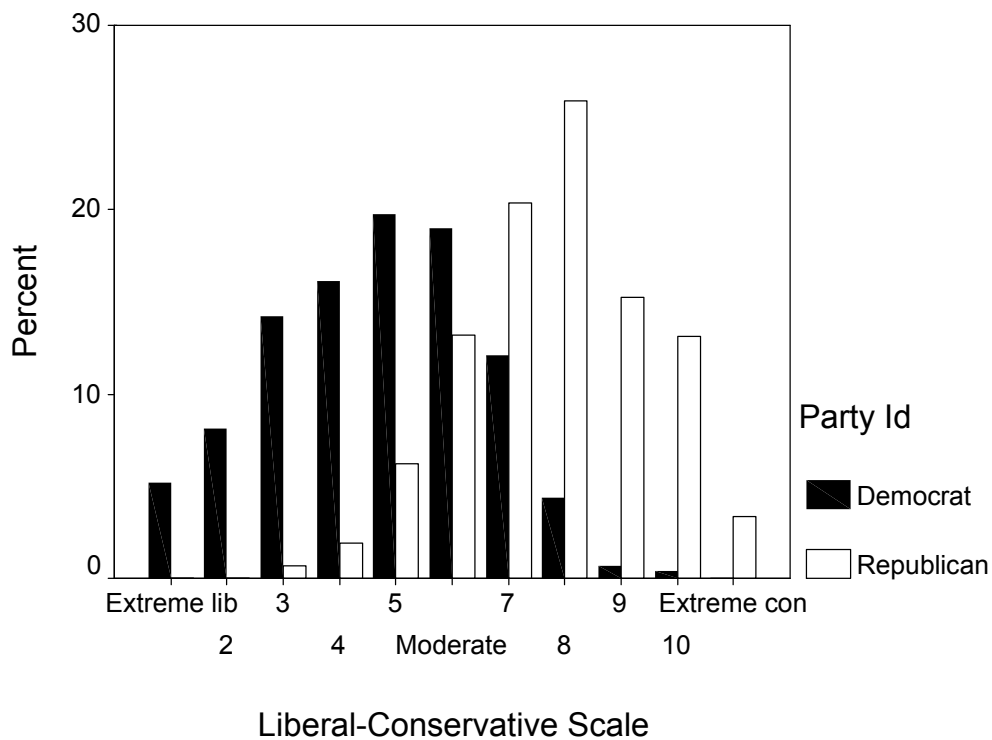
also consistent with the findings of previous research on American public opinion going back to the pioneering work of Converse (1964) who found that ideological constraint was quite low among the general public.

Although ideological constraint appears to be somewhat greater today than it was during the 1950s and 1960s, ideological consistency is still relatively rare. But does the fact that most Americans are moderates, or perhaps more accurately, inconsistent in their political views, mean that the electorate is not polarized? In order to answer this question, we have to look beyond the overall distribution of political attitudes in the public to see whether there are major differences in the political views of various subgroups. It is the existence of subgroup cleavages, rather than the overall distribution of opinion, that is critical in determining the extent of ideological polarization in a society.

2. Partisan Polarization

Perhaps the most significant subgroup cleavage in a democracy is that involving political parties. Fiorina argues that partisan polarization is largely an elite phenomenon and that there has been only a slight increase in partisan polarization within the American electorate over the past several decades. Our evidence does not support either of these claims. The evidence from the 2004 NES survey displayed in Figure 2 shows that partisan polarization is not confined to a small group of leaders and activists. The ideological preferences of rank-and-file Democratic and Republican voters actually differed rather sharply. Democratic voters tended to be quite liberal while Republican voters tend to be quite conservative. The mean scores on our 11-point ideology scale were 5.0 for Democratic voters compared with 7.5 for Republican voters. This difference was highly statistically significant ($p < .001$). Sixty-three percent of Democratic voters were on the left side of the scale (1-5) compared with only nine percent of Republican voters; 78 percent of Republican voters were on the right side of the scale (7-11) compared with only 18 percent of Democratic voters.

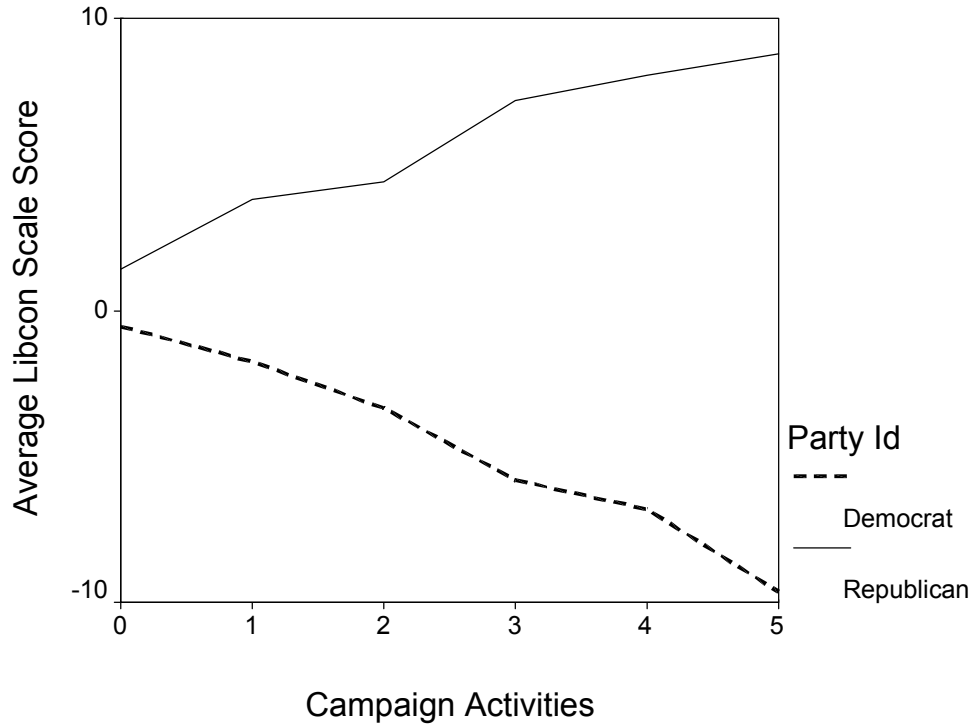
Figure 2. Liberal-Conservative Policy Preferences of Voters in 2004 Election by Party Identification



Source: 2004 National Election Study

Our evidence also indicates that partisan polarization has increased considerably over the past several decades. Unfortunately, very few issue questions have been included on a consistent basis in the NES surveys. However, one question that has been included in every survey since 1972 is liberal-conservative self-identification. The difference between the mean score of Democratic identifiers and leaners and the mean score of Republican identifiers and leaners on the seven-point liberal-conservative identification scale increased from 0.8 units in 1972 to 1.2 units in 1984, 1.6 units in 1996, and 1.7 units in 2004. Given the limited range of this scale, this is a substantial increase in polarization—the gap between Democrats and Republicans was more than twice as large in 2004 as in 1972.

Figure 3. Average Liberal-Conservative Policy Score of Democrats and Republicans by Campaign Activity



Source: 2004 National Election Study

The results in Figure 3 show that active partisans were much more polarized than the overall electorate in 2004. This appears to be consistent with Fiorina's argument that polarization is an elite phenomenon. Contrary to his argument, however, these active partisans made up much more than a "thin slice" of the electorate. Twenty-two percent of all respondents in the 2004 NES survey and 28 percent of all voters in the survey engaged in at least two activities beyond voting. These were the highest percentages in the history of the NES. Active partisans are not a small group of left-wing and right-wing extremists. They are a large minority of both parties' general election voters and they may well comprise a majority of both parties' primary voters (Saunders and Abramowitz 2004).

Our evidence also indicates that active partisans, like rank-and-file partisans, have become more polarized over time. In fact, the increase in polarization among active partisans has been even greater than the increase in polarization among rank-and-file partisans. The difference between the mean score for active Democrats and active Republicans on the seven-point liberal-conservative

identification scale increased from 1.5 units in 1972 to 2.1 units in 1984, 2.4 units in 1996, and 2.9 units in 2004. As was true for rank-and-file partisans, the difference was about twice as large in 2004 as in 1972. In fact, rank-and-file partisans in 2004 were more polarized than active partisans in 1972. The difference of 2.9 units between the average score of active Democrats and the average score of active Republicans on the seven-point liberal-conservative identification scale is quite impressive: 70 percent of active Democrats placed themselves on the liberal side of the scale compared with only 1 percent of active Republicans. On the other hand, 89 percent of active Republicans placed themselves on the conservative side of the scale compared with only 7 percent of active Democrats.

In addition to the difference in ideological self-identification, there were dramatic differences between the positions of active Democrats and Republicans on a wide range of specific issues in 2004. Some of these issue differences are displayed in Table 1. On every one of the eight issues included in Table 1, active Democrats were far more liberal than active Republicans. This was true on social issues, economic issues, and foreign policy issues. The smallest difference, 37 percentage points, was on abortion, an issue highlighted by Fiorina. The largest difference, 59 percentage points, was on the use of military force vs. diplomacy in the conduct of foreign policy. Across these eight issues, an average of 65 percent of active Democrats took the liberal position compared with an average of 18 percent of active Republicans.

Figure 4 displays the trend in the correlation between the seven-point liberal-conservative identification scale and the seven-point party identification scale between 1972 and 2004. This graph shows that contrary to the claim that partisan polarization has increased only slightly, there has actually been a fairly dramatic increase in the correlation between party identification and ideological identification since 1972 and especially since 1988. In addition, ideological identification is itself more strongly correlated with positions on a variety of issues than in the past. For example, the correlation between the ideological identification scale and the jobs and living standards scale increased from .25 in 1988 to .43 in 2004, the correlation between the ideological identification scale and the health insurance scale increased from .23 in 1988 to .44 in 2004 and the correlation between the ideological identification scale and the 4-point abortion policy scale increased from .21 in 1988 to .31 in 2004.

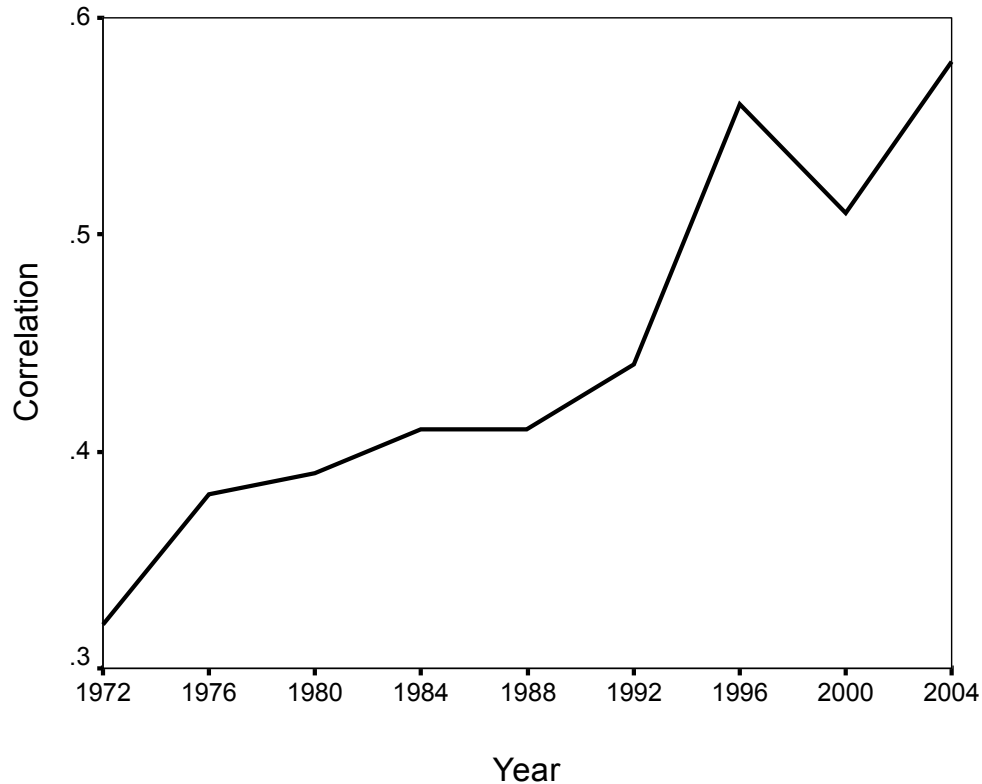
Table 1. Policy Liberalism among Active Partisans in 2004

Issue	Democrats	Republicans
Abortion	78%	41%
Death Penalty	50%	7%
Diplomacy vs. Force	70%	11%
Environment vs. Jobs	70%	24%
Gay Marriage	67%	15%
Jobs/Living Standards	52%	4%
Health Insurance	66%	15%
Spending/Services	66%	25%

Source: 2004 National Election Study

Note: Active partisans engaged in 2 or more activities beyond voting. N of active Democrats is 109. N of active Republicans is 109. Entries shown are percentages of active Democrats and Republicans taking liberal position on each issue.

Figure 4. Correlation of Party Identification with Liberal-Conservative Identification, 1972-2004



Note: Correlation coefficient is Pearson's r based on 7-point party identification scale and 7-point liberal-conservative identification scale.

Source: American National Election studies

Differences between Democratic and Republican identifiers on a wide range of issues have increased substantially over the past three decades. Table 2 displays the correlations between party identification and positions on six different issues during 1972-1980, 1984-1992, and 1996-2004: the larger the correlation coefficient, the greater the degree of partisan polarization on an issue. On every one of these issues, ranging from jobs and living standards to health insurance to presidential approval, partisan polarization increased substantially.

Table 2. Trends in Partisan Polarization on Issues, 1972-2004

Issue	1972-1980	1984-1992	1996-2004
Aid to Blacks	.20	.27	.35
Abortion	-.03	.08	.18
Jobs/Living Standards	.28	.34	.40
Health Insurance	.25	.31	.39
Lib/Con Id	.42	.49	.62
Presidential Approval	.42	.56	.61
Average	.26	.34	.43

Note: Entries shown are average correlations (Kendall's tau) between issues and party identification (strong, weak, and independent Democrats vs. strong weak and independent Republicans).

Source: American National Election Studies

Evaluations of presidential performance have become much more divided along party lines since the 1970s and evaluations of George W. Bush in 2004 were sharply divided along party lines. Ninety-two percent of Republican voters approved of Bush's performance and 70 percent strongly approved; in contrast, 86 percent of Democratic voters disapproved of Bush's performance and 69 percent strongly disapproved. Evaluations of George W. Bush were more divided along party lines than those of any president since the NES began asking the presidential approval question in 1972. The difference between the percentage of Democratic identifiers and leaners approving of the president's job performance and the percentage of Republican identifiers and leaners approving of the president's job performance was 36 points for Richard Nixon in 1972, 42 points for Jimmy Carter in 1980, 52 points for Ronald Reagan in 1988, 55 points for Bill Clinton in 1996, and 71 points for George W. Bush in 2004. Thus, the highly

polarized evaluations of George Bush in 2004 were not unique—they represented a continuation of a trend that goes back at least 30 years.

3. Geographical Polarization

The evidence displayed in Table 3 shows that states have become much more sharply divided along party lines over the past several decades. While the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections were highly competitive at the national level, the large majority of states were not competitive. Compared with the presidential elections of 1960 and 1976, which were also closely contested at the national level, there were far fewer battleground states in 2000 and 2004 and the percentage of electoral votes in these battleground states was much smaller. The average margin of victory at the state level has increased dramatically over time and far more states with far more electoral votes are now relatively safe for one party or the other: red states have been getting redder while blue states have been getting bluer.

Table 3. The Shrinking Battlefield:
A Comparison of the 1960, 1976, 2000, and 2004 Presidential Elections

	1960	1976	2000	2004
National vote margin	0.2%	2.1%	0.5%	2.5%
Average state margin	8.0%	8.9%	13.8%	14.8%
Number of states that were:				
Uncompetitive (10% +)	18	19	29	31
Battlegrounds (0-5%)	24	24	15	12
Electoral votes of:				
Uncompetitive states	124	131	314	332
Competitive states	327	337	167	141

Source: *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections*, 4th edition.
For 2004 election: www.uselectionatlas.org.

In the 2004 presidential election, 38 of 50 states were carried by either George Bush or John Kerry by a margin of at least six percentage points.¹ These states included more than two-thirds of the nation's voters. Contrary to Fiorina's claim that there are few significant differences between red state voters and blue state voters, the evidence from the 2004 National Exit Poll displayed in Table 4 shows that when we focus on states that supported Bush or Kerry by a margin of at least six points, there were some dramatic differences between red state voters and blue state voters. Compared with blue state voters, red state voters were much more likely to be Protestant, to consider themselves born-again or evangelical Christians, and to attend religious services at least once per week. They were much more likely to have a gun owner in their household and much less likely to have a union member in their household. Red state voters were also much more likely to take a pro-life position on abortion, to oppose permitting marriage or civil unions for gay couples, to approve of the war in Iraq, to approve of George Bush's job performance, to describe themselves as conservatives, to identify with the Republican Party and, of course, to vote for George Bush for president.

4. Religious Polarization

It is no coincidence that the largest differences between red state voters and blue state voters in Table 4 involved their religious beliefs and practices. The United States is a nation that is increasingly divided along religious lines. However, the most important religious divide in American politics today is not between Protestants and Catholics, but between religious voters and secular voters. Although Americans are much more religious than citizens of other Western democracies (Dalton 2002, pp. 113-114), evidence from the 2004 National Exit Poll displayed in Figure 5 shows that there is a sharp divide within the American electorate between religious and secular voters. There is a large group of voters who report that they attend religious services at least once per week; there is an equally large group who report that they seldom or never attend religious services.

¹ A list of red states (those carried by Bush by at least 6 points), blue states (those carried by Kerry by at least 6 points), and purple states (those decided by less than 6 points) is provided in the appendix.

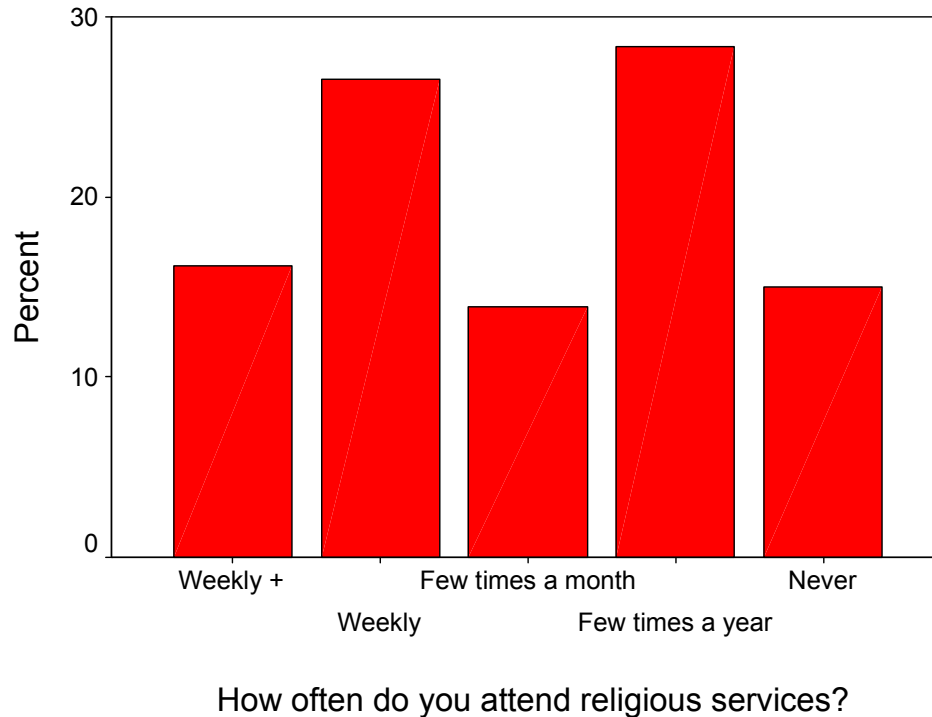
Table 4. A Comparison of Red State Voters and Blue State Voters in 2004

	Red State Voters	Blue State Voters	Difference
Religion:			
Protestant	69%	41%	+ 28%
Catholic	16%	35%	- 19%
Jewish, other, none	15%	24%	- 9%
Church Attendance:			
Weekly or more	54%	34%	+ 20%
Seldom, never	32%	53%	- 21%
Evangelical, born-again	51%	22%	+ 29%
Gun owning household	53%	28%	+ 25%
Union household	16%	31%	- 15%
Pro-choice on abortion	46%	69%	- 23%
Oppose gay marriage or civil unions	51%	26%	+ 25%
Approve of Bush's job performance	63%	45%	+ 18%
Approve of Iraq war	60%	45%	+ 15%
Conservative identification	41%	27%	+ 14%
Republican identification	44%	30%	+ 14%
Voted for Bush	60%	44%	+ 16%

Source: 2004 National Exit Poll

Note: Red states were carried by George Bush by a margin of at least 6 percentage points; blue states were carried by John Kerry by a margin of at least 6 percentage points.

Figure 5. Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services in the 2004 Electorate



Source: 2004 National Exit Poll

Among white voters in the United States, religious observance is now highly correlated with political attitudes and behavior. The evidence displayed in Table 5 from the 2004 NEP shows that, contrary to Fiorina's claim that religious beliefs and practices do not deeply divide the American electorate, there was a very wide gulf in political attitudes and behavior between white voters who regularly attended religious services and those who seldom or never attended religious services. Not surprisingly, the gap was widest on cultural issues: there was a 47 point difference on the issue of abortion and a 33 point difference on the issue of gay marriage. However, the gap was very large on other issues as well: 19 points on the war in Iraq, 24 points on President Bush's job performance, 25 points on ideological identification, 23 points on partisan identification, and 25 points on presidential candidate preference.

Table 5. Political Attitudes of Religious and Non-Religious Whites in 2004

Issue Never	Attend Religious Services	
	Weekly or More	Seldom or
Oppose legal abortion	69%	22%
Oppose marriage or civil unions for gays	54%	21%
Approve of Iraq war	68%	49%
Approve of Bush job	72%	48%
Conservative identification	49%	24%
Republican identification	55%	32%
Voted for Bush	71%	46%

Source: 2004 National Exit Poll

Contrary to Fiorina's claim that economic cleavages remain as important or more important than religious cleavages within the electorate, the evidence displayed in Table 6 from the 2004 NEP shows that among white voters, two variables measuring religious beliefs and practices, church attendance and born-again or evangelical identification, were more strongly correlated with party identification and presidential candidate choice than any other social characteristic including income, education, gender, marital status, and union membership.

Table 6.
Correlates of Partisanship and Presidential Vote among Whites in 2004

Characteristic	Correlation with	
	Party Identification	Presidential Vote
Family Income	.094	.107
Education	-.020	-.077
Marital Status/Married	.136	.151
Age	-.058	-.021
Gender/Female	-.077	-.069
Union Household	-.139	-.130
Church Attendance	.205	.287
Born Again or Evangelical	.219	.280

Note: Correlations are Kendall's tau. Party identification and presidential vote coded in Republican direction.

Source: 2004 National Exit Poll

The religious divide within the American electorate is likely to deepen in the future because secular voters constitute a growing proportion of the electorate and because religious commitment is increasingly correlated with political attitudes and behavior. According to NES data, the proportion of Americans giving their religious affiliation as "other" or "none" increased from 3 percent during the 1950s to 5 percent during the 1960s, 8 percent during the 1970s, 11 percent during the 1980s, and 15 percent during the 1990s. The same data show that the correlation between frequency of church attendance and presidential candidate choice among whites increased from .02 during the 1950s to .03 during the 1960s, .10 during the 1970s, .08 during the 1980s and .29 during the 1990s. The religious divide is now much deeper than the class divide in American politics.

5. Partisan Gerrymandering

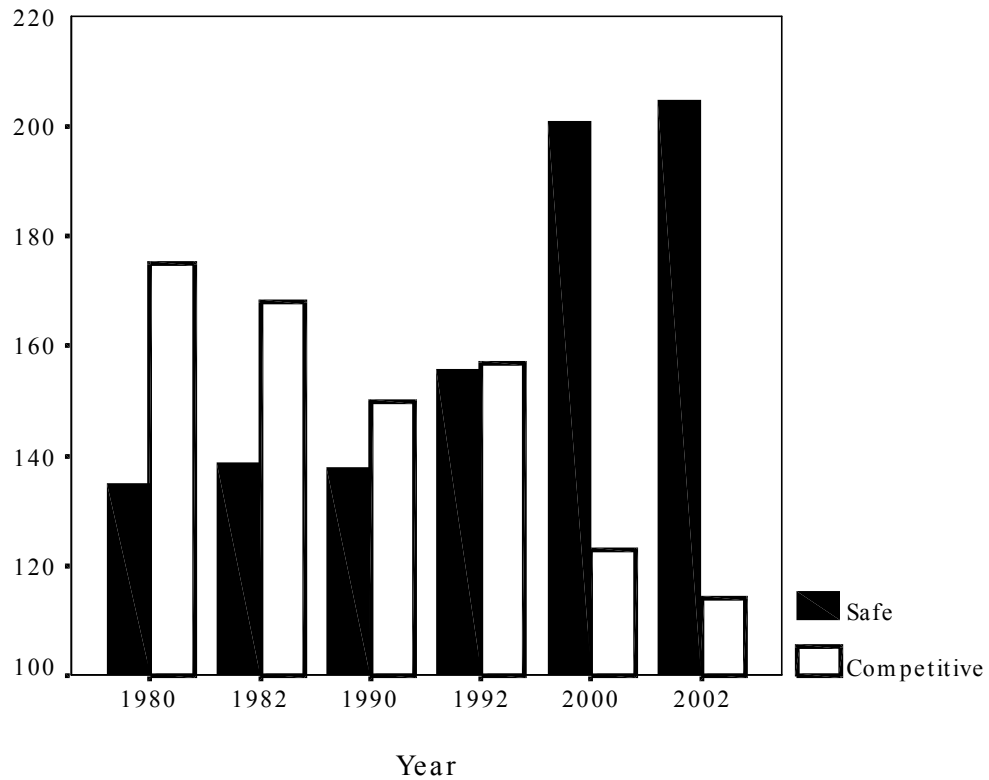
Fiorina claims that partisan gerrymandering is largely responsible for the increasing number of safe districts in the House of Representatives. In order to test this claim, we measured the partisan composition of House districts before

and after redistricting based on the normalized presidential vote—the difference between the Democratic or Republican share of the major party presidential vote in a district and the Democratic or Republican share of the national major party presidential vote in the most recent presidential election. Districts that were at least 10 points more Democratic or Republican than the nation were classified as safe Democratic or safe Republican districts. Districts that were within 5 percentage points of the nation were classified as competitive. This measure correlates very strongly with the outcomes of House elections: in 2004 over 95 percent of safe Democratic districts were won by Democratic candidates and over 95 percent of safe Republican districts were won by Republican candidates (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2005).

The evidence displayed in Figure 6 shows that redistricting had very little effect on the competitiveness of House districts in any of the three recent redistricting cycles. However, there was a substantial increase in the number of safe districts and a substantial decrease in the number of competitive districts between redistricting cycles, especially between 1992 and 2000. House districts have become less competitive over time, but not because of redistricting (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2005).

It is not just House districts that are becoming less competitive. We have seen that states have become less competitive since the 1970s and the same trend is evident at the county level (Bishop 2004). The trend in some states, such as California, has been quite dramatic. Table 7 compares the competitiveness of California counties in the 1976 and 2004 presidential elections. In the 1976 presidential election, the large majority of California's 58 counties were closely contested and these counties included the large majority of California voters. In the 2004 presidential election, the large majority of California's counties were overwhelmingly Democratic or Republican and these counties included the large majority of California voters.

Figure 6. Numbers of Safe and Competitive House Districts Before and After Redistricting, 1980-2002



Note: Marginal districts are those in which Democratic presidential candidate's percentage of major party vote is within 5 points of national percentage; safe districts are those in which Democratic presidential candidate's percentage of major party vote is more than 10 points above or below national percentage.

Source: Data compiled by authors

Table 7. Competitiveness of California Counties in the 1976 and 2004 Presidential Elections

Margin	1976		2004	
	Counties	Voters	Counties	Voters
LT 10%	46	72%	13	21%
GT 20%	2	8%	36	64%

Source: Data compiled by authors.

Over time, red states, counties, and congressional districts have been getting redder while blue states, counties, and congressional districts have been getting bluer. This increasing geographical polarization is not a result of redistricting. It is a result of fundamental changes in American society and politics. Internal migration, immigration, and ideological realignment within the electorate are producing a nation that is increasingly divided along partisan, ideological, and religious lines.

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this paper does not support Fiorina's claim that polarization is largely a myth concocted by social scientists and media commentators. While most Americans are moderate in their political views, there are sharp divisions between supporters of the two major parties that extend far beyond a narrow sliver of elected officials and activists. Red state voters and blue state voters differ fairly dramatically in their social characteristics and political beliefs. Perhaps most importantly, there is a growing political divide in the United States between religious and secular voters. These divisions are not a result of artificial boundaries constructed by political elites in search of electoral security. They reflect fundamental changes in American society and politics that have been developing for decades and are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

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Appendix: Red, Purple, and Blue States in 2004 National Exit Poll

<u>Red States (21)</u>	<u>Purple States (12)</u>	<u>Blue States (12)</u>
Alabama	Colorado	California
Alaska	Florida	Connecticut
Arizona	Iowa	Delaware
Arkansas	Michigan	Illinois
Georgia	Minnesota	Maine
Idaho	Nevada	Maryland
Indiana	New Hampshire	Massachusetts
Kansas	New Mexico	New Jersey
Kentucky	Ohio	New York
Louisiana	Oregon	Rhode Island
Mississippi	Pennsylvania	Vermont
Missouri	Wisconsin	Washington
Montana		
Nebraska		
North Carolina		
Oklahoma		
South Carolina		
Tennessee		
Texas		
Utah		
Virginia		

Note: District of Columbia, Hawaii, North Dakota, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming not included in 2004 NEP sample.