Beyond the Left-Right Divide:
How the Multidimensional Character of Mass Policy Preferences Affects American Politics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
American political parties have undergone a fundamental transformation during the last several decades. Once seen as ideologically heterogeneous and lacking well-defined policy positions, both parties have staked out more clearly defined ideologically-oriented positions during recent decades—hence, the growing polarization of the American party system. This polarization has two primary characteristics. The first is that it has led to an emptying of the ideological center of both parties and the complete absence of ideological overlap of the Republican and Democratic members of Congress. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) show that the most liberal Republican member of Congress is now more conservative than the most conservative Democrat—or alternatively stated, the ideological separation between the parties has grown in recent decades; liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans dominate elite party politics and there are fewer moderates in both parties. The second characteristic of this polarization is that virtually all policy conflict in Congress and among party elites more generally can now be expressed along a single broad liberal-conservative dimension (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). This means that for partisan elites their preferences on economic and social-welfare issues like health care, social security, and tax policy are part of the same ideological dimension as their preferences on social and cultural issues like abortion and gay rights. These characteristics—ideological homogeneity within party coupled with ideological separation between parties where all policy issues can be represented by a single dominant liberal-conservative ideological dimension—make the current American party system distinct from its recent predecessors and more similar to a typical European parliamentary system (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994).
However, the situation is very different when it comes to the public. Public opinion surveys consistently show that on most issues citizens locate themselves toward the middle rather than at either extreme. Moreover, research going back to Converse has demonstrated that mass policy preferences cannot be reduced to a single liberal-conservative ideological dimension. Instead, the domestic policy preferences of the public vary along two principal dimensions, a first dimension associated with economic and social-welfare issues and a second dimension dominated by social and cultural issues. While the preferences of party elites on these two dimensions are closely aligned—hence, the single dimensional structure of elite opinion—for the mass public these dimensions are only weakly related.

The central purpose of this book is to explore citizens’ ideology, attitudes and behaviors in this environment of elite polarization. Our book poses a simple but fundamental question about the nature of representative democracy: what are the political consequences of the discrepancy between the one-dimensional structure of elite policy preferences and the two-dimensional structure of citizens’ policy preferences? We will demonstrate that the extent to which the electorate is responsive to partisan elites is conditional on the structure of mass policy preferences. It has long been recognized that citizen responsiveness to elite cues depends on political sophistication; the sophisticated portion of the public being far more responsive than the less sophisticated. Our research shows that separate from political sophistication the underlying structure of mass policy preferences has a significant effect on citizen responsiveness to elite polarization, affecting a wide range of political attitudes and political behaviors including partisan attitudes, partisanship, voting behavior, and several forms of political participation.

Because elite policy preferences are one-dimensional, those political elites who are conservative (liberal) on economic issues will also be conservative (liberal) on social issues. However, mass policy preferences are two dimensional and the two dimensions are largely orthogonal. As a consequence, the total electorate is composed not only of voters who have liberal or conservative preferences on both economic and social issues but also those who have liberal preferences on one issue dimension but conservative preferences on the other dimension. In other words, in addition to liberals and conservatives, the electorate also includes libertarians who have liberal positions on social issues and conservative positions on economic issues, and populists who have conservative positions on social issues and liberal positions on economic issues. A fifth ideological group is represented by those who have moderate preferences on both economic and social issues.

Our fundamental hypothesis is twofold. In the first place, we expect voters who share the outlook of their party to be most responsive to the polarization of partisan elites. That is, for voters whose policy preferences reflect the structure of that found among party elites, we expect a more partisan and behaviorally-engaged citizenry (see Hetherington 2001;
Abramowitz 2010; Carsey and Layman 2006). In other words, those citizens who hold consistently liberal or consistently conservative positions on economic AND social issues should have more partisan attitudes and be more involved in the political process which after all is dominated by political elites who share their ideological perspectives. For citizens with consistently liberal or conservative views the polarized set of policy choices offered by party elites matches their own policy preferences. Indeed, Levendusky (2009) shows that liberals have sorted into the Democratic Party just as conservatives have migrated to the Republican Party. In both cases, the elite policy menu matches consumer tastes.

But what about those citizens whose structure of policy preferences does not match those of party elites? Our related hypothesis is that libertarians and populists as well as moderates should be less responsive to the polarization of party elites precisely because these citizens do not share the outlook of either party (see Fiorina 2009). Libertarians have conservative preferences on economic issues and therefore should prefer the Republican Party on these bread and butter issues. But they also have liberal positions on social issues and thus should prefer the Democratic Party on this issue dimension. Populists have the opposite pair of policy preferences and thus are closer to the Democratic Party on economic issues but closer to the Republican Party on traditional values issues. In a word, libertarians and populists are cross-pressured which leads them to develop ambivalent attitudes toward both parties. This ambivalence is manifested in a number of ways including the sense that both parties are less relevant to their political concerns and that the political process itself is less amenable for advancing their political interests. Finally, moderates, like libertarians and populists, have policy preferences that are not represented by the polarized policy choices offered by either party and consequently should also be less responsive to the polarization of party elites from both attitudinal and behavioral perspectives.

In addition to examining how different ideological groups within the electorate respond to elite polarization, we also consider this situation from the perspective of competing party elites. Given that these cross-pressured voters are the citizens most likely to alter their support for the parties, they make viable targets for ambitious politicians seeking electoral support. We discuss different strategies that elites employ as they confront an electorate with diverse ideological orientations—strategies that often boil down to a choice between broadening their ideological appeals to attract disaffected citizens or intensifying their appeals that reinforce the ideological divisions that exist in the public.

In sum, our research explains how the polarization of partisan elites has differentially impacted the electorate depending on whether or not citizens share the ideological outlook of their party. Liberals and conservatives have developed stronger partisan attitudes and become more active in party and electoral politics as the ideological clash between the parties has intensified. In contrast, libertarians, populists and moderates have
adopted more ambivalent partisan attitudes and are less likely to take an active role in party politics and engage in various forms of conventional political participation. This research goes beyond the increasingly stale debate about polarization in the mass electorate to address the more fundamental attitudinal and behavioral consequences that result from the discrepancy between the one-dimensional structure of elite policy preferences and the two-dimensional structure of citizens’ policy preferences.

Our wide array of empirical evidence comes from secondary analysis of American National Election Study surveys and original surveys conducted in conjunction with the Center on Congress at Indiana University, the Cooperative Congressional Election Study and the Cooperative Analysis Campaign Study in various years. We also use evidence from several laboratory experiments conducted at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.