

## **17.20 Introduction to the American Political Process**

Recitation: Partisanship and American Political Divide

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# **Partisan Sorting versus Attitude Polarization**

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- “Americans are more divided than ever”
- But are average Americans more divided on political issues?
- Or the issue division merely mirrors the political preferences of those highly engaged citizens?
- What do we mean by “polarization”? More disagreement on certain political issues? Partisan identity becomes stronger? Campaign rhetorics become more acrimonious? Politics become more confrontational?

# **A Working Definition of Polarization**

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# Lecture Materials

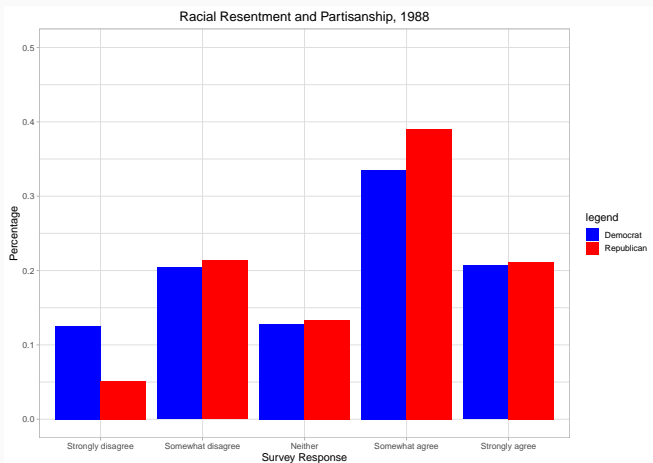
- Scholars generally agree on the definition of partisan sorting:
  - Partisans hate each others (Mason, 2018)
  - Partisanship has become a stronger predictor of Presidential vote (Achen and Bartels, 2017)
  - The policy preferences of partisan voters have become more consistent and predictable
- Less so on the definition of polarization
  - Some argued that issue polarization and partisan sorting are the same thing
  - But other said that partisan voters becoming more extreme does not necessarily suggest that average people have become more extreme on certain issues
  - We adopt a more parsimonious definition: people's ideological preferences move towards the poles of a distribution (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson, 1996)

## **Some Case Studies**

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# Case Study: Partisan Sorting without Attitude Polarization

- We turn to the American National Election Studies to see how partisans' racial attitudes evolved:



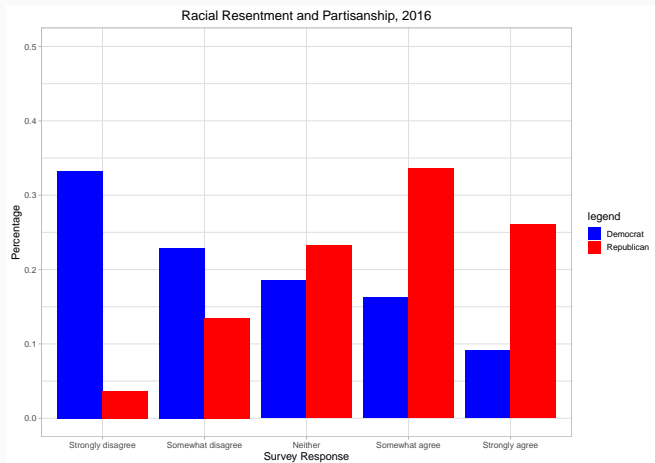
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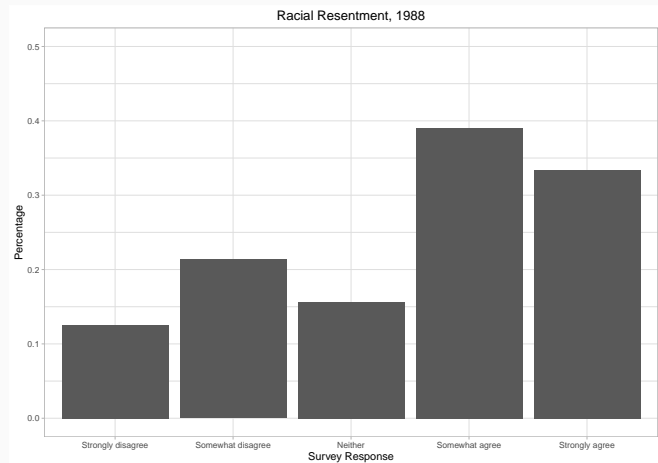


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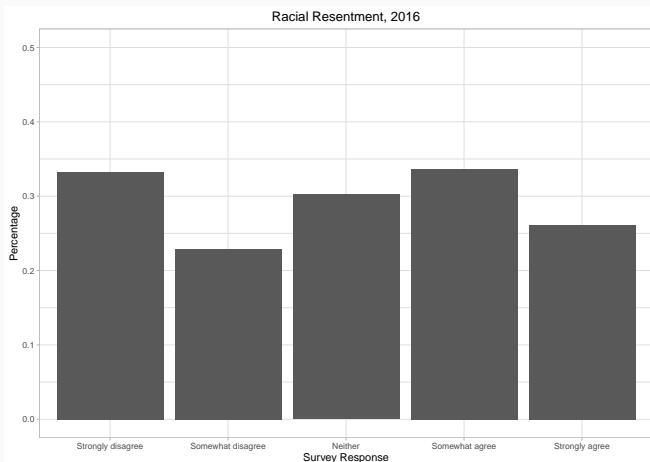


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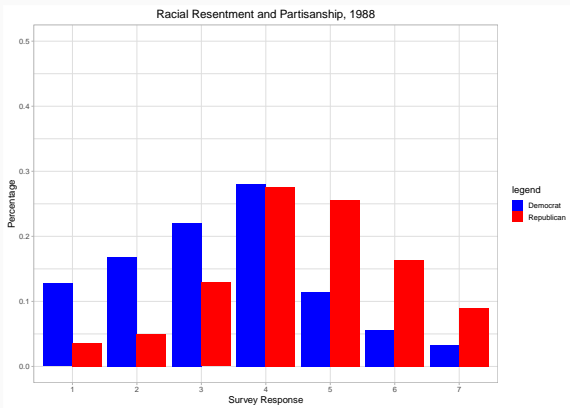


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- We turn to the American National Election Studies to see how partisans' economic attitudes evolved:

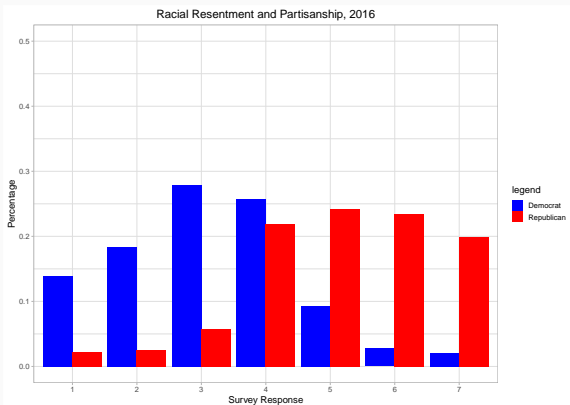


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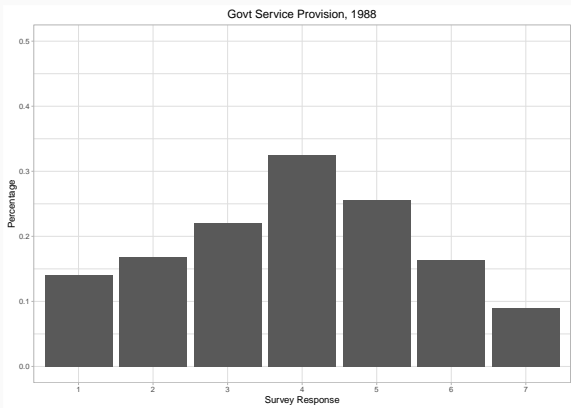


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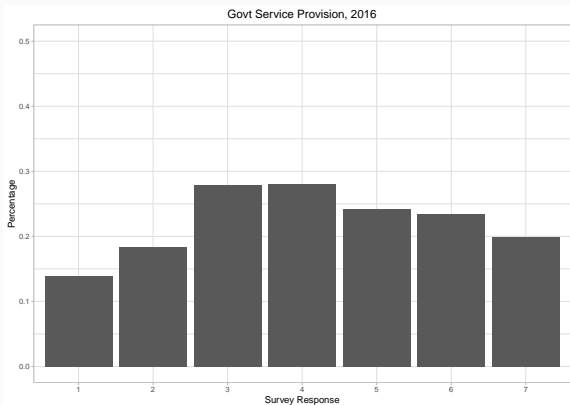


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# Problems of Attitude Polarization

- Overtime American citizens' opinions on some issues changed in one direction: 1. Immigration; 2. Abortion; 3. LGBTQ Rights...
- Inter-temporal comparison is difficult (Asking internet neutrality in 60s?)
- Overlooked the political preferences of independents and moderates.
- Average Americans are still relatively uninformed about politics.



# Consequences of Partisan Sorting

- Scholars agree that political elites have become more polarized. Polarized elites with a relatively unpolarized public can have some serious consequences.
- Independents and moderates become politically disengaged
  - Often times they only have two candidates to choose from
  - Ballot initiatives are also binary choices
  - Media become more partisan so they choose to avoid political news at all
- Partisan voices become louder
- Less representative federal and state government (leap-frog representation)

## Why Media Still Talk about the Great Political Divide?

- Politicians, pundits, political commentators, journalists, and scholars are the most politically involved citizens. They think average people behave the same.

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