The Other Side of Sorting:

Social Fractionalization of American Parties

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Abstract

Social sorting and demographic change are affecting the compositions of American partisan coalitions. It is well established that one important outcome is polarization: Democrats and Republicans have been getting more distinct in terms of their social profiles. But are the two parties also becoming more internally cohesive on the same social cleavage dimensions? I address this question using data from the American National Election Studies time-series and find that U.S. parties, especially Democrats, are becoming more socially fractionalized. I also show that the social cleavages inside the two partisan coalitions have been moving from cross-cutting to reinforcing---again, primarily within the Democratic Party. Increasing fractionalization of the two parties may have led the Democratic and Republican elites to focus their increasingly divided constituencies on hating the other side thus causing affective polarization.

Two interrelated processes have been transforming U.S. parties over the last decades. One of them is social sorting: voters with distinct group identities such as race, religion, class, and ideology tend to concentrate in either Democratic or Republican coalition (Mason 2018). Another process is demographic change: American society is getting less religious (Voas and Chaves 2016), and more ethnically diverse, primarily due to immigration. These shifts accelerate sorting: for instance, white Americans are abandoning the Democratic Party (Zingher 2018), largely in response to the growth of Latino population (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). As a result, Democrats and Republicans are developing distinct and broadly recognizable social profiles.

At the same time, much less is known about the impact of sorting and demographic change on the internal compositions of American parties. The fact that an average Democrat and an average Republican have been getting more distinct from each other does not necessarily imply that the two partisan coalitions have been also becoming more socially cohesive, i.e. more likely to share the same group memberships. Do two randomly chosen supporters of the same party have greater probability to belong to the same racial, religious, class, or ideological group now compared to four decades ago? I address this question using data from the American National Election Studies on the social compositions of the two parties. I demonstrate that the Democratic Party have been getting more socially fractionalized on all analyzed dimensions whereas for the Republican Party the picture is mixed. Moreover, social cleavages within the two parties seem to be reinforcing and this process is, again, more pronounced for Democrats. It means that political polarization in the United States can be a defensive strategy of party elites that construct the out-party as a common enemy to unite their increasingly fragile coalitions.

Social Cleavages and Partisanship

Social cleavages are among the major forces shaping American partisanship (Lazarsfeld, Gaudet, and Berelson 1948). Even works that see partisanship as a group identity in its own right, recognize a strong relationship between social and political loyalties. For instance, almost all changes in personal partisan identification described by respondents in *The American Voter* happened as a result of social or geographic mobility (Campbell et al. 1960). Development of partisanship can be described using the "best match" principle: a voter tends to identify with the party assumed to best represent groups he or she is a member of (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). This logic very well corresponds to the relationship between social sorting and affective polarization: as various social identities align with each other and with partisanship, feelings toward the in-party and the out-party polarize (Robison and Moskowitz 2019). It also highlights potential importance of party compositions: social cleavages within parties, especially reinforcing ones, can lead to internal divisions and factionalism.

Given the degree of inter-partisan animosity in modern American politics, it is often assumed by political commentators that Democrats and Republicans have been turning more socially unified. However, this conjecture has never been explicitly tested. Moreover, there are reasons to suspect that social cohesion within the two parties has been declining rather than growing. First, demographic changes making American society as a whole more diverse should have also impacted internal compositions of the partisan coalitions. Second, anecdotal evidence from the 2016 and 2020 presidential primaries suggests presence of relatively stable divides within the national parties. Third, recent research indicates existence of ideological factions within congressional parties (Clarke 2020). Finally, mass-level affective and ideological polarization inside partisan coalitions seems to be happening (Groenendyk, Sances, and Zhirkov

2019). Some of these divisions are likely associated with personality predispositions (Wronski et al. 2018). But is intra-party factionalism also undergirded by social divisions?

Data

To trace the social compositions of U.S. partisan coalitions over the last decades, I use data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) time-series. I concentrate on the four key social cleavages: race, religion, class, and ideology (see Table A1 in Online Appendix for the descriptions and coding of the corresponding variables). My analysis covers years from 1972 (when the ideology question was first asked) to 2016 yielding the total of 20 time points. All analyses to follow include only self-identified Democrats and Republicans, without leaners.

Results

I start from describing the changes in compositions of the two parties on race, religion, class, and ideology from 1972 to 2016. Since some of these findings have already been reported in the literature on partisan sorting, I present full results in Online Appendix (see Table A2). Here, I simply outline the general trends as they are important for the discussion on fractionalization. In 1972, the Democratic coalition had white, Protestant, working class, and ideologically moderate majorities. By 2016, the share of whites in the Democratic Party decreased to being only a small majority, the share of non-religious people grew turning Protestants into just a plurality, the shares of those from working and middle class was 50/50, and liberals slightly outnumbered moderates. The Republican coalition in 1972 was overwhelmingly white, mostly Protestant, and evenly divided between working and middle class as well as between moderates and conservatives. By 2016, the shares of whites and Protestants within the Republican Party decreased, although these two groups remained majorities on the respective cleavage

dimensions. Over the same time period, even splits on class and ideology among Republicans turned into clear dominance of the middle class and conservatives within the party.

Changes within the two partisan coalitions described above suggest that they have not been getting more homogenous. If anything, internal diversity seems to have increased, particularly among Democrats. To test this conjecture more formally, I employ the fractionalization index, a metric of societal heterogeneity popular in comparative politics and political economy (Alesina et al. 2003). The index is calculated independently for each social cleavage as one minus the sum of the squares of the shares s_i of the relevant groups within the population indexed $i = 1, ..., I$, where the group shares are expressed as fractions of the total:

$$1 - \sum_{i=1}^{I} s_i^2.$$

The resulting indicator has a direct and intuitive interpretation: it is the probability that two randomly selected supporters of a party belong to different social groups on the same cleavage dimension. It ranges from 0 to $(1 - I)/I$, where I is the total number of relevant groups.[1]

Table 1 presents trends in fractionalization estimated with the ANES data from 1972 to 2016. Estimates show that fractionalization within the Democratic Party has been increasing on all analyzed social cleavage dimension. As a result, average fractionalization among Democrats has been going up as well.[2] The Republican Party, in turn, has been getting more fractionalized on race and religion but, at the same time, more homogenous on social class and ideology. Still,

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[1] Since the social class cleavage has only two groups whereas race, religion, and ideology have three, I rescale the class fractionalization index, so that all four indices have the same range from 0 to 2/3.

[2] In some years, social class questions were not asked in the ANES surveys. For such years, I calculate average fractionalization using only race, religion, and ideology.

the average indicator of fractionalization in the Republican coalition is positive and significant

on the 99% confidence level---largely, due to a very strong increase in religious heterogeneity.

Among Democrats, the strongest increase in fractionalization has occurred on race.

Table 1. Estimated trends in fractionalization

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Race	0.31***	(0.03)	0.18***	(0.03)
Religion	0.14***	(0.03)	0.28***	(0.03)
Class	0.03***	(0.01)	-0.05***	(0.01)
Ideology	0.04*	(0.02)	-0.17***	(0.02)
Average	0.13***	(0.02)	0.05**	(0.02)

Note. SE = standard error
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

So far, I have demonstrated that, on average, the two major U.S. parties are increasingly

socially fractionalized. However, social cleavages are not uniformly associated with stronger

political divisions. The character of cleavages is important: they can be cross-cutting (weak

overlap between different group identities) or reinforcing (strong overlap). In political sociology,

cross-cutting cleavages are associated with political stability and tolerance whereas reinforcing

cleavages are thought to cause political conflict and polarization (Lipset 1960).

Have social cleavages within American partisan coalitions been moving toward a cross-

cutting or reinforcing structure between 1972 and 2016? To estimate trends in overlaps between

different intra-party cleavages, I use Cramer's V statistic. It is a measure of association between

two nominal variables based on Pearson's chi-squared that can range from zero (no association,

ideal cross-cutting cleavages) to one (perfect association, ideal reinforcing cleavages).

Table 2 presents estimated trends in Cramer's V for all cleavage combinations. Among

Democrats, two important cleavage pairs have been moving toward the reinforcing direction:

race--religion and race--ideology. As a result, average cleavage overlap among Democrats has

been trending to the reinforcing direction as well. In the Republican coalition, only the race--class cleavage pair has been reinforcing with time whereas the average trend in cleavage overlap is effectively flat. Overall, this analysis corroborates results on changes in fractionalization: the Democratic Party is increasingly socially divided whereas changes within the Republican Party are muted. At the same time, none of the two parties is becoming more socially unified.

Table 2. Estimated trends in cleavage overlap

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Race--Religion	0.18***	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.03)
Race--Class	0.05	(0.03)	0.09**	(0.03)
Race--Ideology	0.11***	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)
Religion--Class	0.01	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)
Religion--Ideology	0.02	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)
Class--Ideology	0.07	(0.05)	-0.03	(0.05)
Average	0.08***	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)

Note. SE = standard error
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Cramer's V statistic measures the degree of overlap between the social cleavages within the two parties but says nothing about the substantive patterns of such overlaps. Therefore, I move to investigating how exactly race has been overlapping with other social cleavage dimensions. Following the results obtained so far, I focus on the divisions in religiosity (church attendance) and ideology between white and non-white Democrats. Results are presented in Figure 1. For comparability, religiosity and ideology variables are rescaled to a range from 0 (least religious, most liberal) to 1 (most religious, most conservative). Trend estimates show that white and non-white Democrats were relatively close in terms of both religiosity and ideology at the beginning of the analyzed period. However, by 2016 the two groups were strongly divided on the same cleavage dimensions with white Democrats being strongly and significantly less religious and more liberal than their non-white co-partisans.
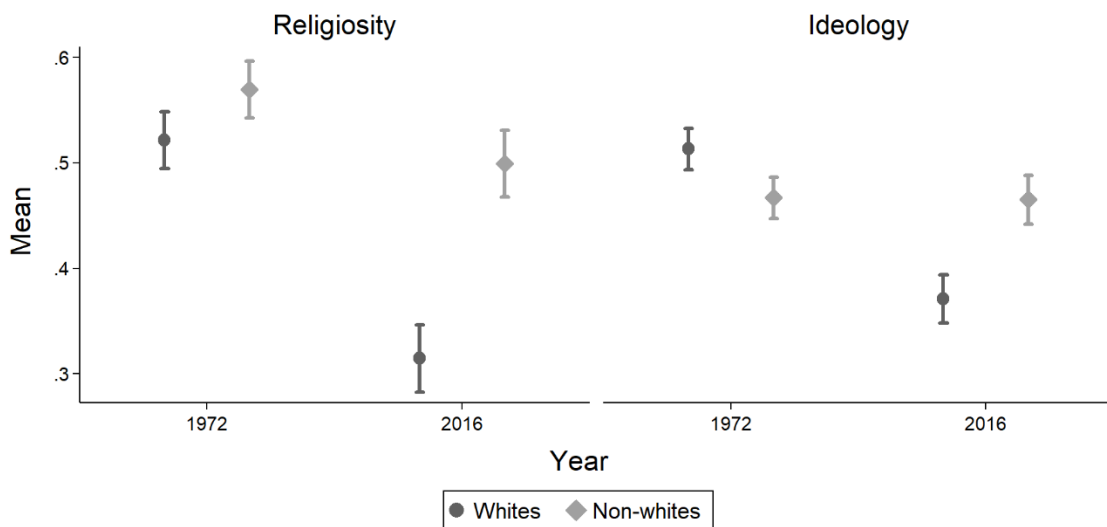
Figure 1. Trends in religiosity and ideology among white and non-white Democrats

Conclusion

In this paper, I estimate trends in internal compositions of the American parties from 1972 to 2016 using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) time-series. I find that none of the two partisan coalitions is getting more socially unified. Quite on the contrary, the Democratic Party is becoming increasingly fractionalized on all analyzed dimensions: race, religion, class, and ideology. The Republican Party is experiencing diverging trends as it is becoming more racially and religiously diverse but also more unified in terms of ideology and, contrary to some anecdotal evidence, social class. I also show that intra-party social cleavages have been reinforcing over the analyzed time period, particularly among Democrats. According to my results, the Democratic Party is increasingly divided between progressive secular whites and people of color who tend to be politically moderate and fairly religious.

Results presented in this paper shed new light on the phenomenon of affective polarization in American partisan politics. Since social heterogeneity negatively impacts social trust and potential for collective action (Habyarimana et al. 2009), growing fractionalization may

have prompted Democratic and Republican elites to foster partisanship as a common in-group identity by emphasizing inter-party differences. This may explain the increase in negative campaigning noticed in foundational research on affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Paradoxically, the rise of negative partisanship, a major force in American politics nowadays (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Bankert 2020), can be a defensive reaction against intra-party fractionalization, not a result of growing social unity within the partisan coalitions

Overall, my findings are in line with some recent contributions that emphasize presence of important political divisions among Democrats and Republicans, notwithstanding social and affective polarization between parties. I show that these internal political disagreements can be fueled by social fractionalization within the American partisan coalitions. Researchers have recently moved to study these internal cleavages, such as a potential divide between Latinos and African Americans, the two major Democratic constituencies (Krupnikov and Piston 2016). Still, divisions inside American partisan coalitions are clearly understudied, especially since social and political processes happening *within* the two parties may have implications for the future of the U.S. party system no less important than the ones happening *between* them.

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Online Appendix

Table A1. Analyzed social cleavage dimensions

Cleavage dimension	Variable code	Categories: Analysis	Categories: ANES
Race	VCF0105b	White	White non-Hispanic
		Black	Black non-Hispanic
		Other	Hispanic
			Other or multiple races
Religion	VCF0128	Protestant	Protestant
		Catholic	Roman Catholic
		Other	Jewish
			Other and none
Class	VCF0148	Working	Lower class
			Average working
			Working--NA average or upper
			Upper working
		Middle	Average middle
			Middle class--NA average or upper
			Upper middle
			Upper class
Ideology	VCF0803	Liberal	Extremely liberal
			Liberal
			Slightly liberal
		Moderate	Moderate, middle of the road
			Don't know; haven't thought much about it
		Conservative	Slightly conservative
			Conservative
			Extremely conservative

Note. "Other" race category: mostly Hispanic. "Other" religion category: mostly non-religious

Table A2. Party compositions in 1972 vs. 2016

	1972	2016	Change
Democrats			
Race			
White	.81	.56	−.25
Black	.17	.24	+.07
Other	.03	.19	+.16
Religion			
Protestant	.63	.45	−.18
Catholic	.30	.23	−.07
Other	.07	.32	+.25
Class			
Working	.61	.50	−.11
Middle	.39	.50	+.11
Ideology			
Liberal	.22	.50	+.28
Moderate	.60	.41	−.19
Conservative	.18	.09	−.09
Republicans			
Race			
White	.97	.85	−.05
Black	.03	.01	−.02
Other	.01	.14	+.13
Religion			
Protestant	.82	.55	−.27
Catholic	.14	.25	+.11
Other	.04	.20	+.16
Class			
Working	.47	.37	−.10
Middle	.53	.63	+.10
Ideology			
Liberal	.09	.02	−.07
Moderate	.48	.25	−.23
Conservative	.43	.73	+.30

Note. Shares may not sum up to one due to rounding