

Coalition realignment, White flight from the Democratic Party, and partisan polarization in the US

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Abstract

Why did partisan polarization occur so extensively in the United States when it did, in the late 20th century, and not at other times or in other democracies? Existing, largely elite-centric theories, provide unsatisfactory explanations. I use a group-centric theoretical approach to show how changes in the composition of party coalitions, largely outside elite control, provided the initial trigger. I outline how the process may have been driven by the recruitment of African-Americans as a core component of the Democratic coalition and the flight of Southern Whites from the party. I also demonstrate that this began earlier than is often considered, in the 1950s and 1960s, with elite polarization following, rather than leading electoral realignment, with more liberal and racially diverse Democrats and Southern conservative Republicans entering Congress only after the coalitions had begun to change.

Shifting coalitions and polarization in the US

Although there is widespread scholarly consensus on the existence of growing ideological divisions between the parties, there is less agreement precisely how or why partisan polarization occurred (see Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006). Numerous explanations have been offered, including primary elections, gerrymandering, a more partisan media environment, economic inequality and immigration.² The standard accounts of this process frequently preference the agency of political elites. Politicians are often seen as the principal drivers of polarization, and the public generally passive and reactive.

This raises some important questions. If the primary causes were economic inequality, or processes endogenous to competitive party systems, why did partisan polarization increase to the extent it did, when it did, in the US, and not earlier or later, or more widely across other mature representative democracies during the same period?

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²By partisan polarization I mean a combination of mass sorting based on ideology (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) and conflict extension (Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006).

That more consistent elite ideological divisions make mass sorting more likely is a reasonable inference, supported by evidence. It is also possible that growing economic inequality or other factors had a hand in polarization. I contend these do not provide complete explanations, though. The existence of ideologically differentiated elites is not unique to the US, nor is inequality, and the causal mechanisms for the polarization of American political elites at this point in history are often poorly theorized. I argue that the process of partisan polarization observed in the US over the second half of the 20th century was not predominantly an elite-driven phenomenon. Rather, it was largely induced — at least in its early stages — by the movement of Black voters into the Democratic coalition (encouraged initially by the New Deal and then the civil rights movement) and the flight of White Southerners to the Republican Party; which I contend occurred largely outside the control of party leaders.

That the racial realignment of the US party system played a role in the ideological polarization of the parties has been recognized by some scholars (for instance, Frymer 2011). However, that racial realignment was the initial trigger of a process of partisan polarization is less generally accepted; particularly in the polarization literature (for an overview, see Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006).

The contribution of this paper is to link newer ideas of party motivations and behaviors with a framework based on formal theory, tested with several empirical observations. I connect group-centric theories of parties as interest aggregators (Masket 2009; Bawn et al. 2012; Karol 2015; Baylor 2017) with the formal theory work on party behavior by Wittman (1973; 1977; 1983) and Roemer (2001). In this view, groups that share compatible issue preferences align within a coalition and nominate candidates who are willing to pursue these common policy goals. Realignment within and between party coalitions form new ideological bundles, and potentially drive polarization.

This framework differs with some other dominant ideas about how political parties function — particularly legislative-centered views (Schwartz 1989; Aldrich 1995), and those that privilege the role of elites — and what drives polarization. Rather than politicians solely dominating a party and its candidate selection process, in this model of political parties it is social and interest groups that are the most important driving force within coalitions. Negotiation is required between the leadership and important groups that comprise their coalition, and realignments that increase the ideological coherence of the groups comprising party electoral alliances, a key determinant for the beginning of partisan polarization in the US.

Besides providing a different explanation for the initial causes of polarization than much of the existing literature, I also contend the process began earlier than often considered. Much of the work on polarization (and racial realignment) identifies the change point in the 1960s and 1970s (see, for instance, Carmines and Stimson 1989). I argue the process began earlier, starting by the 1950s; more than a decade prior to the start of polarization in Congress.

Of course, this is not a monocausal process. However, I demonstrate below that there is support for the idea that the racial realignment had a role initiating

ideological partisan sorting. It was the existence of this racial cleavage, driven in part by the American experience with race-based slavery and inequality — a relatively unique feature of the US compared to other mature representative democracies (Dawson 1994) — which provided an opportunity for intense polarization that generally does not exist in comparable societies. The politicization of this racial division created overlapping economic and social cleavages, linked with partisanship and ideology; a trigger for intense polarization.

Competing theories

Both institutional and contextual explanations have been provided for party polarization in the US, most of which privileges the role of political elites as the drivers of polarization.

Institutional explanations of polarization view primary elections and gerrymandering as potential causes. Citizens who participate in primary elections may be more ideologically consistent than the general electorate, and less likely to select moderate candidates than office-motivated parties seeking electoral success (Cadigan and Janeba 2002; Owen and Grofman 2006). Gerrymandering is viewed as creating ideologically homogeneous districts, more likely to elect less moderate representatives (Eilperin 2006, ch 5; Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Pope 2005; Carson et al. 2007; Theriault 2008).

There is little evidence, however, to support claims that the use of primaries as a mechanism for candidate selection plays a significant role in polarization (McGhee and McCarty 2014), and the US has employed primary elections widely for approximately 100 years. They were introduced during the Progressive Era, and used for most offices by the early 20th century, including presidential nominations in many states (Reynolds 2018). This includes the mid-century period of convergence, as well as the later period of polarization. They were adopted on a near universal basis for presidential candidate selection later (in the 1970s); although in some states caucuses remained in use. However, as I demonstrate below, shifts in the party coalitions began earlier than this. This is not to say that primaries may not play a role in polarization, or provide an institutional basis that makes it possible. It seems likely, though, that there was another trigger that began the process.

Gerrymandering is another unlikely cause of polarization. A successful gerrymander involves packing and cracking: packing an opponent’s voters into the fewest winnable districts possible, and spreading supporters efficiently across many districts. This dilutes the gerrymanderer’s support base, and (theoretically) requires an appeal to moderate voters, not ideological extremists (see McCarty and Rosenthal 2009). This tactic to minimize electoral risk is also old (the namesake gerrymander occurred in 1812), and was used in periods of partisan convergence as well as polarization.

Contextual explanations of polarization include the increasingly partisan nature of the news media, and growing immigration and inequality. The fractured and ideological nature of some media outlets has been identified as a cause (Levendusky 2013); especially the emergence of the conservative Fox News

(Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). Evidence suggest it is the already polarized who gravitate towards cable news, though; with the media having little influence on their policy preferences (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Fox News and the liberal alternative MSNBC also came too late to start off the process of polarization (both were launched in 1996, while congressional sorting, for instance, started in the 1970s).

McCarty and Rosenthal (2006) argued that polarization, inequality and immigration are mutually causal. For much of the period when polarization was low, immigration to the US was heavily restricted, taxation policy generally redistributive, social spending growing, and economic inequality declining. Policies concerning redistribution and immigration began to shift concurrently with increasing Congressional polarization from the 1970s. Although this argument is plausible, the causal mechanisms are not entirely clear. Nor do these explanations account for the failure to observe widespread increases in polarization during earlier periods of inequality (including the Gilded Age in the US); or in similar liberal democracies over the same period,³ also experiencing growth in economic inequality (though often lower than the US; see World Inequality Database 2015) and comparable or higher rates of immigration (The World Bank 2019).

In addition to these explanations, most theories of public opinion change have long privileged the role of elite cues (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Zaller 1992; Gilens and Murakawa 2002; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006). These have provided one of the primary connections between elite and mass polarization, with politicians often seen as leading the process and voters following (see Layman and Carsey 2002). This elite polarization may in part be strategic, or at least initiated by strategic considerations (with the Southern Strategy being an example of this).

That elites influence mass opinion is theoretically justified and supported by empirical findings. In a system with polarized parties and elites sorted along ideological lines, parties are more ideologically homogeneous, their positions are distinct, and elites are sending citizens clearer signals about issue positions. These defined differences make following cues a less complex process for voters, and as elite polarization increases, voters are more easily able to correctly identify where parties stand on salient issues and sort themselves accordingly, driving mass polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; on the causal mechanisms involved, see Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2010).

However, elite sorting on its own is unlikely to be sufficient to drive polarization. There are always political elites attempting to move public opinion, their party and policy outcomes towards their ideal point. Despite the extent of its partisan polarization being unusual, the existence of ideologically-sorted party

³Partisan convergence has been observed in Germany (Munzert and Bauer 2013), the Netherlands (Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2012a; 2012b) and the United Kingdom (Adams and Vries 2011; although the British electorate may have polarized recently, see Cohen and Cohen 2019). There are claims of convergence (Marsh 2006) and stability (Ratcliff 2017) for Australia, but not polarization.

elites is not unique to the US (on Australia, see Jackman 1998; Ratcliff 2017), and the causal mechanisms for the polarization of American political elites from the 1970s, and not at another time, are often poorly theorized. For parties to ideologically sort at the mass and elite level, specific conditions are required. This includes electoral coalitions amenable to supporting these changes. Rather than significant partisan change beginning (primarily) with the conscious intent of political elites, I contend the principal movers are shifts within and between coalitions of groups responding to changing circumstances.

Parties as interest aggregators

In contrast to many other scholars and commentators who view partisan polarization as a predominantly elite-driven process, I demonstrate why we may view the increasing ideological gap between America's major political parties as being largely driven by the changing composition of their coalitions. Democratic and Republican politicians represent and respond to electoral coalitions with significant social, economic and political differences. The growth of these differences drives ideological divergence.

Accounts of political parties in the mid-20th century frequently privileged the role of group demands in party politics (Bentley 1935; Key 1949; Schattschneider 1960). By the 1980s, though, this had changed to a legislative-centered view, with office-holders and candidates viewed as the most important actors within parties.

This characterization of political parties is well represented by the Schwartz-Aldrich model. Developed by Thomas Schwartz (1989) and John Aldrich (1995), this model parties as endogenous to legislatures, and nothing more than stable (or long) coalitions. They are the tools of politicians, who are themselves no more than office-seekers with the primary aim of obtaining the private benefits of public office (similar to Downsian models of party behavior; see Downs 1957). Parties are used as vehicles to coordinate the activities of legislators and candidates, allocating benefits to legislators' constituents, and providing ready access to a built-in base of supporters and campaign machinery. While these accounts generally recognize that links exist between parties and wider society, and that politicians may also have policy goals, these were frequently viewed as subordinate to electoral success. This logic underlies many popular theories about party and legislative politics from the last several decades (for a discussion, see Cohen et al. 2009, ch. 2).

This view of parties is overly narrow. Yes, they are valuable for office-seeking candidates. They also provide significant benefits to policy-motivated actors, and can be seen as interest aggregators representing diverse electoral coalitions made up of politicians, activists, financial contributors and voters, united by shared policy goals. These policy-motivated actors can use parties to pursue their interests, and in the process act as an ideologically centrifugal force helping to drive partisan polarization.

To understand this, I adapt and apply the formal theory of Wittman (1973; 1977; 1983) and Roemer (2001), and incorporate the group-centric theories of

Masket (2009), Bawn et al. (2012), Karol (2015) and Baylor (2017). In this framework, parties and voters are utility satisficers with bounded rationality. Rather than utility derived primarily from obtaining office, though, it is from gaining the best policy outcomes (from the actor or group perspective).

The groups that comprise party coalitions are likely too well entrenched in the social structure and individuals' identities to be easily manipulated by parties and candidates; with membership of these groups exogenous to and likely superseding partisanship. Although various elites may have influence — religious leaders over their congregations and politicians with some supporters — this is a chaotic and contested process rather than an easily used, deliberate and well-planned activity. It is, arguably, also a predominantly local rather than national or centralized activity (see Masket 2009).

A theory of group-centric parties

Government-forming political parties can be viewed as networks of Downsian office-seekers, policy-seekers and ideologues (described as factions in Roemer 2001, ch. 8). In my adaptation of the Wittman and Roemer models, these factions emerge from interest groups i that make up the core of the party coalitions. These groups form electoral alliances around a common agenda, and provide links between civil society and the parties. They use their involvement with the party to select candidates for public office and through this, influence the positions parties and candidates take on policy, shaping party ideologies.

We let d and r represent the policies of the Democratic and Republican parties on k issues. The policy (or ideological) goals of both parties are shaped by the aggregate nature of the interests they represent, with Md the cumulative preferred policy positions of interests i supporting the Democratic Party and Mr the overall issue preferences of the Republican coalition. Let m denote the ideal point of i on k , Md and Mr can be calculated as the weighted mean preferences of the groups that comprise a party coalition:

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^n m_i * w_i}{\sum_{i=1}^n w_i} \tag{1}$$

with w the weight (or influence) of each group i within a coalition.

If the Democratic Party consists of actors from unions, and socially or economically disadvantaged groups, and the Republican Party includes supporters from the middle class, corporate executives and small business owners, we would expect Md and Mr to be different. For instance, corporate interests and higher income earners may support the Republican Party in greater numbers because Mr provides them with policy utility that Md does not, such as lower taxes.

The Wittman and Roemer models provide three principal reasons why parties will not move towards the center on policy: 1) parties are required to adopt policy positions ahead of elections in conditions of uncertainty, making the precise location of the median voter difficult to determine and moderation a less attractive proposition; 2) elections are repeated games, parties have publicly adopted policy positions in the past, and therefore possess limited flexibility to

move these positions again during campaigns; and 3) moderation may lose a party the support of its activists, donors and volunteers, reducing its ability to contest elections. I add an addendum to this: 3b) not only can activists and other actors remove their support, they can also control resources and influence candidate nominations, and can replace politicians too willing to compromise (see also Masket 2009; Bawn et al. 2012; Karol 2015; Baylor 2017). The influence of each group on the nominating process, and their ability to shape the aggregate ideological preferences of the party, is represented by w in formula (1) above.

This places bounds on the ability of political elites to shift the ideology of their party. Rather than interest groups i being used by party elites to win office, the process is at least two-sided. By influencing the nomination of candidates who pursue policies advantageous to their interests, these groups can act as a centrifugal force within an electoral system, pulling their parties' politicians away from the preferences of the median voter (contra Downs 1957; see Baylor 2017 for a detailed discussion).

The extent these parties compromise their policy preferences influences the utility of an election win, where $U_r(Z)$ (for Republicans), with z the k -dimensional vector of policies implemented after an election, and U_r a von Neumann–Morganstern utility function of z with a maximum at Mr , then $|r - Mr| \leq |d - Mr|$. Under these assumptions, the Republican coalition has no incentive to win an election by moving to the left of the Democratic Party, and parties comprised of group interests may be forced to abandon electorally-beneficial moderation, or even become more extreme, to maintain the equilibrium of their coalitions (see Appendix A for additional details).

This model, described by Wittman and Roemer, applies to groups within the party coalitions, and complications may arise when these are divided on salient issues or their composition changes. Both eventualities require trade-offs to maintain equilibrium. If this cannot be achieved, the result may be party realignment. When $|r - m_i| \leq |d - m_i|$ is repeated over several elections for group i , which traditionally aligns Democratic, d no longer offers greater utility, and we expect i to begin shifting Republican. When this occurs, the re-sorting of party coalitions can form new ideological divisions, with groups fitting together (at least in part) independently of the preferences of elites, and sometimes at the expense of a party's electoral competitiveness. This can further change the nature of both Mr and d , and r and d , reflecting the new equilibrium of both parties, and instigating further shifts in electoral coalitions.

One possible outcome of this process is more ideologically coherent parties. When there is within-party incongruence over an issue increasing in salience, as civil rights was from the 1950s, one component of a party coalition may gain ascendance, pushing discordant elements from the electoral alliance. The relative influence w of the remaining groups increases, and more consistently ideologically sorted candidates may be nominated to represent this more coherent coalition, moving the aggregate preferences of the parties and the policies they adopt further from the center.

From the beginning of the New Deal until the 1970s, the Democratic Party became a more diverse coalition of interest groups, incorporating a larger number

of African-American voters and activists. Consequently, it became more likely to nominate candidates supportive of civil rights to Congress and the presidency. Hubert Humphrey became the Democratic candidate for president and George Wallace ran as an independent. Southern Whites lost influence within the party and eventually left to become a more important component of the Republican coalition, which elected Ronald Reagan as president, while Rockefeller Republicans lost influence. The end result was more consistent ideological sorting among the mass public and elites.

Realigning interests, White flight and polarization

Rather than significant partisan change beginning primarily with the conscious intent of political elites, I argue the realignment of important social groups within the parties was one the major triggers of partisan polarization.

This can be seen as comprising several falsifiable steps. Starting with the recruitment of Black voters as a core component of the Democratic coalition, this realignment can be thought of as a partially exogenous event that changed the equilibrium the US party system. This racial realignment was (at least in some measure) external to the party system, as it was not merely the result of efforts by political elites to win the support of these voters, but was the outcome of coalition shifts that in part occurred despite the opposition or ambivalence of large parts of the Democratic leadership (see Schickler 2013); and not only in the South.⁴ Many Democratic elites, including from the North, had longstanding relationships with the opponents of civil rights legislation. Rather than being championed within by party leaders, civil rights reforms were largely led by groups independent of, but associated with, the party,⁵ and elements of organized labor (especially the Congress of Industrial Organizations; see Baylor 2017, chs. 2-5).

This leads to:

HYPOTHESIS 1 Black interests become more important within the Democratic coalition in the 1950s and 1960s, influencing the nomination of candidates, resulting in a more diverse set of Democratic legislators.

This growing importance of Black interests within the Democratic Party led to a realignment of both party coalitions. By the early 1950s, the Democratic coalition comprised potentially mutually exclusive interests: Southern Whites, Northern Blacks and urban migrant groups. Each interest group i had their own median ideal point m . Initially, at least, these included some common goals. The South was generally poorer than the North, and most Southern Whites found common cause with the northern Democratic Party due to their disadvantaged position (in the national hierarchy, at least; see Caughey 2018, especially ch. 3). However, the increasingly diverse nature of the Democratic Party during the 1950s made this coalition unstable, resulting in:

⁴For instance, the impact of red-lining on Black households' ability to build wealth (see Baylor 2017, 29).

⁵Including The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the NAACP).

HYPOTHESIS 2 *The aggregate ideological positions of the Democratic coalition Md moved further away from the preferences of White voters, particularly in the South.*

The racial realignment within the Democratic Party reduced the importance of Southern Whites, changed the types of candidates nominated, and created tensions between groups within the coalition with incompatible issue preferences (Black and Black 1987, 246; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 84; Ginsberg 1996, 9). As the composition of the Democratic coalition was altered, and their importance within the Party declined, the more racially liberal the Democratic Party became (Feinstein and Schickler 2008), the further *Md* moved from the preferences of Southern Whites. These shifts in the Democratic electoral alliance changed the political calculus for many White voters. If this theory is correct:

HYPOTHESIS 3 *White voters responded by leaving the Democratic Party, particularly racial conservatives and those in states with large Black populations where the coalition realignments were more consequential.*

As a result, the Republican Party became increasingly popular to Southern and racially conservative Whites. It was a less obvious champion of civil rights, and increasingly the party less favored by Black voters. This realignment within the Republican coalition was also a contested process, though. Elements of the party's leadership made attempts to increase its share of the Black vote, while components of the coalition provided a counterweight. In particular, several business groups opposed extensive civil rights legislation,⁶ The responsiveness of Republican politicians to business interests and Democratic leaders to labor advocacy and the incorporation of significant Black interests within their coalition drove the reversal of traditional party positions (Karol 2009, ch. 4; Baylor 2017, chs. 2-5), leading to my final hypothesis:

HYPOTHESIS 4 *These shifts in the party coalitions are associated with corresponding shifts in elite party ideologies.*

As the relative influence *w* of groups within the party coalitions shifted, the nomination of candidates changed and more ideologically coherent parties were formed. Rather than conservative White voters being split across both parties, they were increasingly concentrated within one party, while the influence of liberal groups increased within the Democratic electoral alliance. This helped create reinforcing cleavages, more coherent coalitions, represented by ideologically sorted candidates, helping drive polarization (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006).

The causality of this is difficult to evaluate. However, each hypothesis is a testable prediction. It is possible to observe whether the theory outlined above is consistent with observed realignments in party coalitions, and ideological polarization.

⁶Especially on measures that would impact the private sector, including fair employment and housing measures (Karol 2009, ch. 4).

Testing these hypotheses

1) Black interests become more important within the Democratic Party, influencing the nomination of candidates

The theory of group-centric parties predicts that coalition composition influences nominations. If correct, change should occur in the electoral coalition (among voters) first, and then after this candidate selection is influenced.

I begin by testing shifts in descriptive representation. I operationalize this by observing changes in the racial composition of the parties' electoral coalitions and congressional delegations; examining the proportion of each party in the electorate that identified as Black, calculated from the combined 1952-2016 file of the American National Election Study (ANES; with survey weights used when available), and the Black share of the parties' House of Representatives delegations (using data from United States House of Representatives 2019). Shifts in the importance of Black interests within a party's electoral alliance should lead to corresponding changes in the level of representation, with the growth in the Black percentage of Democratic identifiers in the electorate, for instance, resulting in the election of more Democratic legislators representative of the Black community.

By the 1950s, the Black composition of the Democratic Party was already relatively large, having grown during the New Deal (Baylor 2017, ch. 4). It grew further in the early 1960s. The change point for this shift was 1962 (represented in figure 1 as the grey vertical line, estimated using a Bayesian change point model; see Appendix B).⁷ In 1960, Black voters comprised less than 9 per cent of Democratic identifiers. This grew to 10 per cent in 1962, 13 per cent in 1964 and 16 per cent by 1968. The change in the identity of representatives nominated by the Democratic Party followed six years later. The proportion of Democrats Representatives identifying as Black increased from approximately 1 per cent in 1950-68, to 4 per cent in 1970, and nearly 8 per cent by 1982.

Of course, it was in 1964 that Barry Goldwater was nominated as the Republican presidential candidate. This may have played a role in these changes. However, I argue the Goldwater campaign was the result of shifts within the party coalitions already underway by 1964, not their cause. Black voters began to shift prior to this, and I show below White voters in states with large Black populations had also already begun to move away from the Democratic Party (see figure 4).

There were additional, later change points in the Black composition of the Democratic coalition (see Appendix B for details). Each time, shifts in Congressional representation lagged changes in coalition composition by six years. The most significant of these were in 1984 for Black share of the electoral coalition, which grew to 18 per cent that year, and jumping to 24 per cent in 1986; and 1992 for the Black composition of the House delegation, which grew from just over 10 per cent that year to nearly 20 per cent in 1996.

⁷I use party identification as it is stable over time (Campbell et al. 1960).

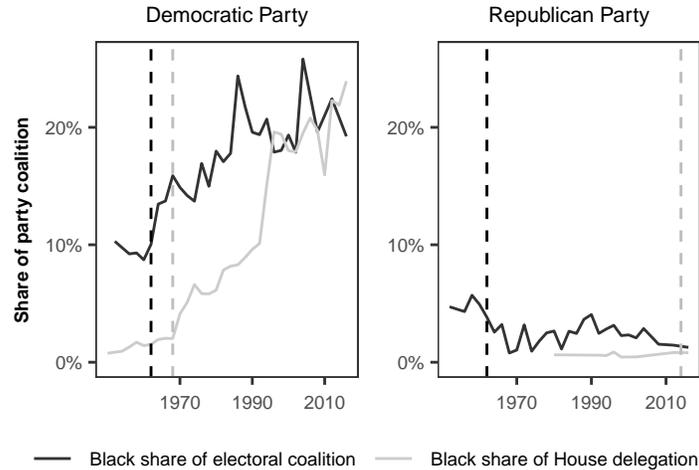


Figure 1: Shifts in Black composition and congressional representation, 1952-2016. Vertical lines are the first change point in each series with a probability above 50 per cent. See Appendix B for details.

Conversely, as the Black share of the Democratic electoral coalition increased, the Republican share declined from 6 per cent in 1958 to less than 1 per cent in 1968 (with the first change point for this series also estimated to be 1962), with no Black members of the Republican House delegation during this period until 1980. According to the ANES, after 1958 the Black share of Republican identifiers would never rise above 5 per cent again, while the Republican delegation in the House would never be more than 1 per cent Black.

These results demonstrate changes in the composition of Democratic electoral support led descriptive representation, and supports the theory that coalition shifts influenced Congressional nominations. By the 1960s, Black interests became more important to the Democratic coalition. This changed the relative weight of interest groups in the nomination of candidates and through this, the composition of the Democratic House delegation. Meanwhile, the Republican coalition has become less Black and its Congressional delegation remained overwhelmingly White. This altered the value proposition for many White voters — particularly racially conservative Whites in Southern states — for staying within the Democratic coalition.

2) *Md* moves further away from the preferences of Southern Whites

As the African-American vote became an increasingly important part of the Democratic coalition, the aggregate ideological positions of the Democratic coalition *Md* moved further away from the preferences of White voters, particularly in the South. The Party became increasingly supportive of civil rights legislation, perceived as a direct threat to the interests of many Southern Whites, who under Jim Crow laws obtained a much greater share of resources — through access to

public goods, property ownership and employment opportunities — than the segregated Black population.

As this occurred, and White voters went from making up almost the entirety of both party coalition to an increasingly smaller share of the Democratic Party, the median democratic ideal point Md moved further away from the preferences of Southern Whites on both racial and economic issues (shown in figure 2).⁸ This decline in the White share of the coalition, and concurrent growth in the Black composition, was a combination of increasing concentration of Black voters in the Democratic Party and growth in turnout following the passage of civil rights legislation (including the Voting Rights Act 1965).

Unfortunately, the survey items required to measure ideological preferences over time are only available from 1972,⁹ so it is not possible to properly measure shifts in median coalition preferences prior to this point. However, by this year it is possible to see that on racial and economic issues, the median White voter in the South and Midwest was already more conservative than the median national Democrat. This difference only grew over time, with the median Democrat moving closer to the median Black voter in most regions (particularly the South) on economics, and further away from the median White voter. By the 2000s, the median White voter in the South was approximately half a standard deviation from the median Democrat, and by 2016 about 84 per cent of Southern Whites were to the right of the median Democrat on the racial dimension, while approximately 85 per cent were more conservative on economic issues.

This shift is consistent with other accounts (including Karol 2015), which have argued that mass polarization occurred from the 1970s onwards. I argue that the process began earlier than this. While the data examined here limit the examination of ideological shifts to the post-1972 era, in that year the m_i of Southern Whites was already moving closer to Mr than Md , with 52 per cent of Southern Whites holding preferences within half a standard deviation of the median national Republican on racial issues and 58 per cent were within half a standard deviation from the median Republican on economic issues. Conversely, 48 and 57 per cent had racial and economic preferences respectively within half a standard deviation of the preferences of the median national Democrat.

The ideological preferences of Southern White voters were already slightly closer to the ideal point of the median Republican on racial and economic issues by 1972, because the racial realignment that I have argued drove much of this partisan polarization was already underway. Black voters had already begun to move into the Democratic Party by the 1950s (as documented above), and Whites in states where this racial realignment was most consequential had already begun to leave the Democratic Party; as I demonstrate next.

⁸Ideological preferences were calculated using an item response theory model fit to ANES data from 1972-2016. See Appendix C for details.

⁹Item consistency in the ANES only really stabilizes from that year.

Distance from the national median Democrat
by race and region

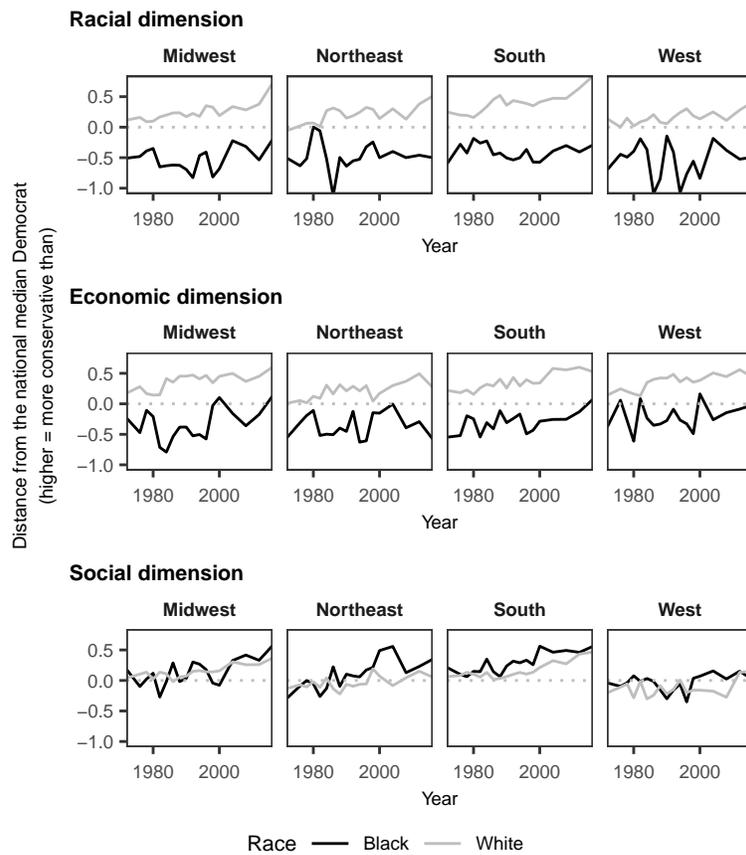


Figure 2: Ideological distance from the median national Democrat by race and region. A positive score indicates the median voter for a group was more conservative than the median national Democrat; a negative score, more liberal. See Appendix C for details on ideology measures.

3) *White voters leave the Democratic Party, particularly racial conservatives and those in states with large Black populations*

There was a White response to the changing nature of the Democratic coalition and the party's aggregate ideologies. Not only did White flight occur in the suburbs into which Black residents moved, it happened in the party the majority of Black voters made their political home.

If the group-centric theory outlined above provides a useful framework for understanding American political parties, this White flight should be concentrated among voters whose perceived interests were most threatened by an increasingly diverse Democratic Party. As the influence of African-Americans grew within the Democratic coalition, it became less likely to represent these perceived White interests, which should begin to leave the Party.

I test this in two ways. I begin by fitting a logistic regression modelling the probability a White voter would identify as a Democrat as a function of the Black share of the Democratic electoral coalition (from the ANES, as above) and racial ideology.¹⁰ These were allowed to interact, so that variations in Democratic identification between White racial conservatives, moderates and liberals can be observed as the nature of the Democratic coalition shifts. These realignments in the composition of the Democratic electoral alliance are not the only possible causes of changes in party identification. As documented above, voters may have changed their party identification in response to signals from political elites. It is also possible there were other trends occurring over the same period that influenced voter behavior. To account for these possible confounding factors, controls are also included in this model for partisan polarization in the House of Representatives (using DW-Nominate scores; Lewis et al. 2019) and a linear time trend (mean centered and scaled to have a standard deviation of one).

As figure 3 shows, as the Black share of the Democratic identifiers in the electorate increased, the probability that racial conservatives will identify as a Democrat declined substantially. When the Black share of the Democratic electoral alliance was estimated to be approximately 15 per cent (according to the ANES), the probability that a racially conservative White voter — here defined as a respondent with an estimated racial ideology at least half a standard deviation more conservative than the electorate mean — was predicted to have a 41 per cent probability of identifying as a Democrat. When the Black share of the Democratic coalition was approximately 25 per cent, though, this was predicted to decline to 27 per cent (holding House polarization and time at their mean values for the period). Conversely, the same shift in the Black share of the Democratic coalition was predicted to increase the probability a White voter with liberal racial preferences would identify as a Democrat, from 61 to 70 per cent.

These patterns are not only temporal, but also spatial. As discussed above, White voters in (southern) states with large Black populations are predicted to

¹⁰Using racial ideology scores from above, respondents more than .5sd from the mean are coded liberal or conservative, and those between moderate.

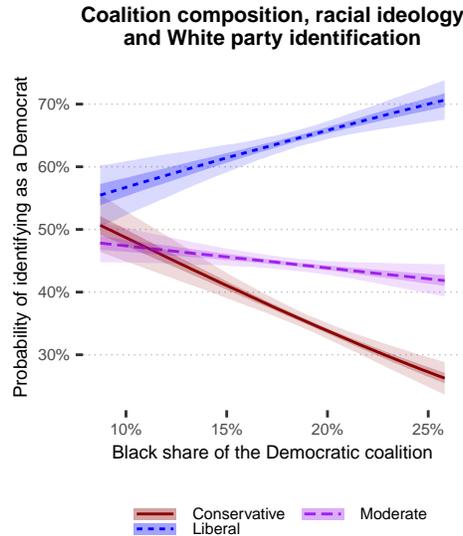


Figure 3: Probability White voters will identify as Democrats, as a function of racial ideology and the Black share of the Democratic Coalition. Shaded areas are 50 and 95 per cent confidence intervals.

become less likely to identify with a Democratic Party as it became increasingly associated with Black interests. I test this by fitting logistic regressions estimating the likelihood a White voter would identify as a Democrat as a function of the Black share of the population of their state. These were run separately for each ANES survey and plotted the coefficients for the Black share of their state population as a time series in figure 4.¹¹ These results support the theory outlined above. Whites in states with larger Black populations were more likely to identify as Democrats in the 1950s, but this changed rapidly from the beginning of this time series.

In 1952, it was estimated the probability a White voter would identify as a Democrat was 51 per cent if living in a state with a Black population one standard deviation below average,¹² 64 per cent if living in a state with an average Black population,¹³ and a 76 per cent probability for those in a state with a Black population one standard deviation above average (figure 5).¹⁴ This was a 25 per cent difference between states with large and small Black populations.¹⁵

¹¹What Gelman and Hill (2007) refer to as the ‘secret weapon’.

¹²This is the average across the whole 65-year period covered by these data, and approximately three per cent Black.

¹³With Black populations of approximately 12 per cent.

¹⁴Approximately 20 per cent Black. In 1952: MS, SC, LA, AL, GA, NC, FL, AR; including seven of the nine states Adlai Stevenson won against Eisenhower in the 1952 presidential election.

¹⁵Predominantly between those states which had used large-scale racial slavery, and those

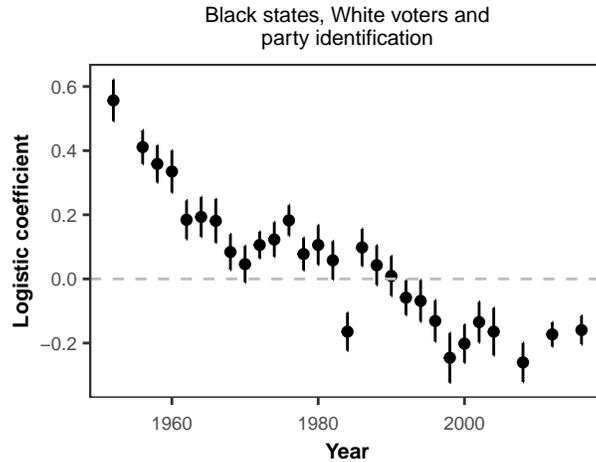


Figure 4: Coefficients and standard errors for the relationship between the Black share of state populations and White Democratic identification. Logistic regressions are fit separately to each ANES survey. Positive coefficients indicate White voters in states with larger Black population shares were more likely to identify as Democrats.

Even at this early stage, White voters in these states with large Black populations were already leaving the Democratic Party. In just one decade, the relationship between the racial composition of a state’s population and White Democratic identification changed considerably, more than halving between 1952 and 1962 (see the coefficients in figure 4).

In 1962, Whites in a state with a Black population one standard deviation below average were predicted to have a 51 per cent probability of identifying as a Democrat, while for those in states with a Black population a standard deviation above average, it was estimated to be 60 per cent; a 9 per cent difference. This indicates that the White flight from the Democratic Party was most consequential in those states where the racial realignment was most significant, and that much of the shift predated the Civil Rights Act and nomination of Barry Goldwater as Republican presidential candidate in 1964.

This pattern has largely reversed by 2016. In that year, White voters living in states with large Black populations were estimated to be 7 per cent less likely to identify as a Democrats than those in states with small Black populations.

To ensure these results were not specific to party identification, and are robust to confounding factors, I replicated both sets of models used in this subsection. These were fit for House of Representatives voting, and with controls for household income, age, gender, education and region. All model specifications had broadly similar results, with racial conservatives becoming less likely to identify with (or vote for) the Democratic Party (or its candidates) as the Black share of the Democratic coalition increases, and with a larger Black population

that had not.

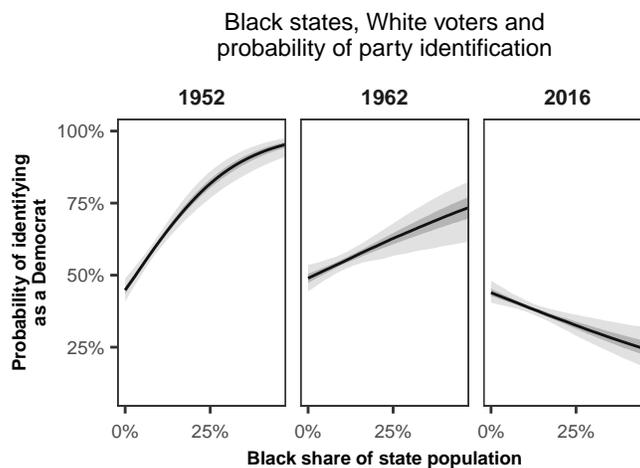


Figure 5: Probability that a White voter will identify as with the Democratic Party as a function of the Black share of state populations. Curves are probabilities calculated from logistic regressions fit separately to ANES survey data for each year, and shaded areas 50 and 95 per cent confidence intervals (using the specifications documented above).

share predicting declining White identification with or support for the Democratic Party over time (see Appendix D in the supplementary materials for details).

As the preferences of the median White voter moved away from the median Democrat, White voters became less likely to identify as, or vote for, Democrats. This White flight from the Democratic Party was most prevalent among White racial conservatives and those living in states with large Black populations. This had implications for mass polarization. I contend that this led, rather than followed, elite polarization in Congress, which I address in the next section.

4) *Changes to the composition of the parties, changes to elite ideology*

According to the group-centric theory of parties as interest aggregators, documented above, candidate nominations follow changes in the weight w , or influence, of groups within party coalitions. Shifts in w drive the nomination of different candidates. The results documented above provide support for these ideas. Variations in the racial composition of the Democratic electoral coalition consistently led changes in the descriptive representation provided by the Democratic House delegation by several years. As this occurred, the non-Black share of the Democratic House delegation from mostly Southern states that had an average Black share of the population above 10 per cent,¹⁶ declined from more than two-thirds in 1952 to little more than a quarter in 2016 (shown in figure 6). Over the same period, Southern non-Black representatives came to dominate the congressional Republican Party.

¹⁶This is 19 states: 14 Southern plus IL, NY, MI, NJ and MO.

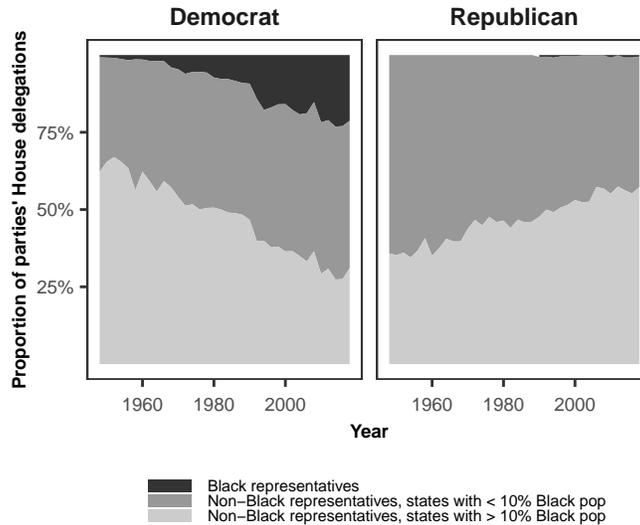


Figure 6: Shifts in the composition of Democratic and Republican House delegations.

These transformations in the makeup of the parties’ coalitions may have also helped drive changes to the policy positions taken by their elected representatives. I test this using DW-Nominate data (Lewis et al. 2019) to measure legislator ideal points, linked to data on representatives’ racial identification (from the United States House of Representatives 2019) and information on the Black share of state populations (from the US Census). Using these data, I am able to observe if changes in the composition of the parties’ House delegations are congruent with the theory documented above, and then whether (as predicted) Congressional polarization follows rather than precedes racial realignments of their electoral coalitions.

While the party coalitions realigned on race, their Congressional wings also became more ideologically cohesive and extreme. The median ideal point of Republican members of the House in particular became much more conservative (see figure 7). This movement to the right began approximately 15 years after first major change point in the Black share of the Democratic electoral coalitions (represented by the dashed vertical lines in figure 6). Similarly, the non-Black Southern contingent of Democratic representatives began to liberalize after 1962, while more Black Democrats were also elected.

The Democratic shift away from the center and towards liberalism was predominantly the result of compositional change. The median ideal point of Non-Black Democratic House members in states with small Black populations (most of the states outside the South) showed little signs of movement between 1952 and 2016. Rather, the Democratic contribution to partisan polarization in Congress was largely the result of the decline of conservative Southern non-Black Democratic legislators representing states with large Black populations; who, as figure 7 demonstrates, had the most conservative median ideal points of the

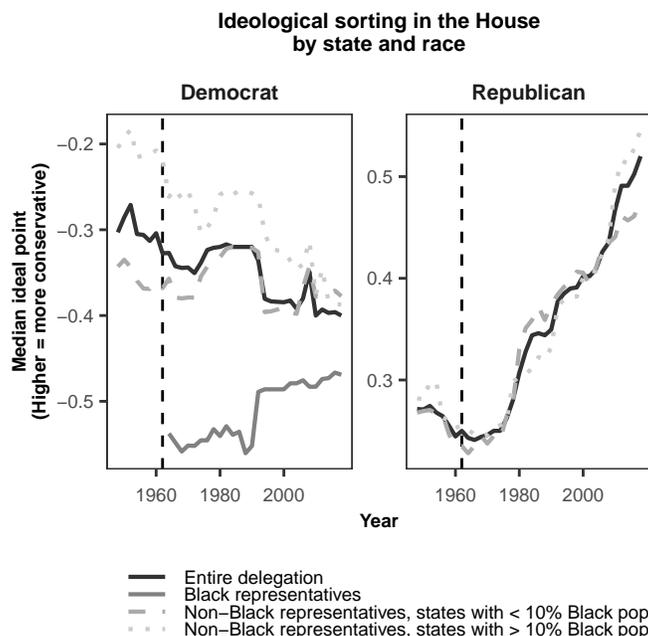


Figure 7: Median ideal points of Democratic and Republican House of Representative members.

Democratic House delegation in 1952. These Southern moderates either became more liberal, or more frequently were replaced by conservative Republicans, a growing number of generally very liberal Black Democratic representatives, and occasionally liberal (White) Democrats.

The outcome of this bipartisan move from the center, shown in figure 7, was a growing gap between the median Democrat and Republican in the House of Representatives, and a decline in the number of Representatives with overlapping ideological preferences. Figure 8 demonstrates how racial realignment and partisan polarization went hand in hand, with the growth in the Black share of the Democratic electoral coalition and Congressional polarization following similar patterns since 1952, and the former estimated to granger cause the latter at both four and six year lags.¹⁷ Although not conclusive evidence for causality, this supports the theory that as Black interests obtained greater influence within the Democratic Party and Southern Whites left and became more important within the Republican Party, more ideologically coherent parties were formed.

Coalition realignments and partisan polarization in the US

Partisan polarization is arguably one of the defining features of contemporary American politics. Many explanations for its cause have been offered. There

¹⁷ $Pr(> F) = 0.54$ for a two-year lag, 0.01 for a four year lag, and 0.03 for a six year lag.

Black share of the Democratic coalition and partisan polarization in the House of Representatives, 1952–20

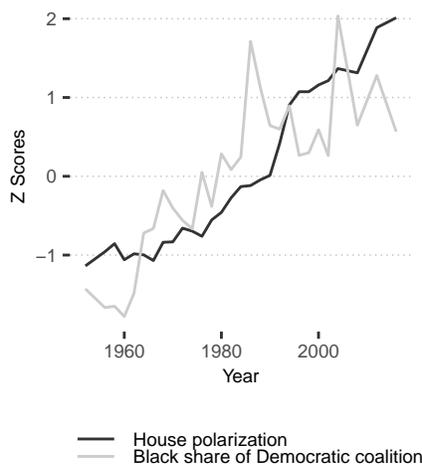


Figure 8: Variation in the Black share of the Democratic coalition and partisan polarization in the House of Representatives, 1952-2016. Black share measures are from the ANES (1952-2016) and polarization data from Lewis et al. (2019). Both have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one.

are three main differences between my explanation for the beginning of partisan polarization and others commonly provided. The first is that rather than polarization beginning primarily with elites, the sorting of groups within party coalitions was a major trigger.

Most accounts of polarization in recent decades have adopted legislative-centered views of parties (Schwartz 1989; Aldrich 1995; on their influence, see Cohen et al. 2009, ch. 2.) privileging the role of elite influence on mass behavior (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006). The causal mechanisms for the beginning of an elite-led process of polarization over the past 50 years are often poorly theorized, however. I adopted and applied a theoretical framework characterizing parties as the aggregators of group interests (using the formal theories of Wittman 1973; 1977; 1983; Roemer 2001) to explain the polarization of contemporary American party politics, and argue that partisan polarization in the US was initiated by the realignment of important social groups within and between party coalitions. Of course, many elites have influence over group members; politicians included. These groups and the individuals that comprise them are not passive objects to be used by elites. Instead, they are the cores of these coalitions (see Masket 2009; Bawn et al. 2012; Karol 2015; Baylor 2017), and this is a chaotic and contested process.

The racial realignment that occurred in the US mid-20th century was not intended by leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties. Rather, it was an exogenous shock to the party system; the outcome of coalition shifts that

in part occurred despite the opposition or ambivalence of large parts of both parties' leaderships. This drove the reversal of traditional party positions on race and helped create more ideologically coherent parties. Through their impact on candidate selection, the liberal and conservative groups that dominated these coalitions acted as a centrifugal force within the electoral system, driving a process of partisan polarization.

Racial cleavages were the driver of US polarization

This realignment, and the large racial cleavage it created, is the reason extensive partisan polarization occurred in the US, but not in many other mature representative democracies. The history of race-based slavery in the US is unusual, and its pivotal role in American politics relatively unique for an affluent liberal democracy (Dawson 1994). Along with the institutional specifics of the US — including economic inequality and primary elections — the conversion of this racial cleavage into a party political division may explain why intense polarization occurred in the US when it did, and not in most other comparable polities.

Although this was not a monocausal process, this shift played an important role linking previously cross-cutting dimensions in society. White flight from the Democratic Party was most prevalent among racial conservatives and those living in states with large Black populations, whose perceived interests were most likely to come into conflict with a Democratic coalition that was increasingly diverse and comprised of Black voters. The politicization of race along partisan lines created reinforcing cleavages, with economic differences linked with other, important and easily recognized group differences; beginning with economic interests, race and partisanship. This helped to create a more liberal and diverse Democratic Party, and consistently conservative Republican coalition.

The process that drove polarization began earlier than is often considered

These findings are consistent with other accounts on the role of race and racial realignment in partisan polarization (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Karol 2015). There are, however, important differences. In addition to positioning groups as the central actors of coalitions, I argue this process began earlier than is often recognized. The 1960s and 1970s are often identified as the inflection point for both American racial politics and polarization. I argue the pivotal shifts began at least a decade earlier, with both Black and White mass alignments underway by the 1950s. These shifts commenced before the Civil Rights Act was passed, the Goldwater presidential candidacy, or the Republican Southern Strategy. Changes in the descriptive representation offered to the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions also started in the 1960s, often following movements in the composition of the parties' support in the electorate with a short lag.

Implications

These findings raise a few considerations. They suggest polarization in the US has involved the development of increasingly ideologically-driven partisanship overlapping with meaningful social identities and lived experiences. When this occurs, it may result in growing distrust of government, the other party, its leadership and supporters (King 1997; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). This may lead to a reduced willingness to accept the legitimacy of the opposition, and the ability of the parties to compromise (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), stall interaction between the executive and legislature and drive policy gridlock (Fleisher and Bond 2000a); even under unified government (Fleisher and Bond 2000b; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). In the US, the growing differences — ideological and descriptive — between voters who identify as Democrats and Republicans, and their elected officials, increases the chances of these outcomes, fueling an environment of intense partisan polarization, and potentially reducing the ability of either party to achieve policy outcomes preferred by citizens generally, and even their own supporters.

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