

Is party polarization bad?

Lane Kenworthy

Fall 2011

Polarization: division into two contrasting or opposing groups

Outline

Americans are not more polarized politically

But the two parties are

Is party polarization bad?

**Americans are not more
polarized politically**

It feels like we're more polarized

Geographic sorting on the basis of political views (red states and blue states)

Straight party-line votes in congress

Heated rhetoric

ONE NATION, SLIGHTLY DIVISIBLE

The electoral map of the 2000 presidential race became famous: big blocks of red (denoting states that went for Bush) stretched across the heartland, with brackets of blue (denoting states for Gore) along the coasts. Our Blue America correspondent has ventured repeatedly into Red territory. He asks the question—after September 11, a pressing one—Do our differences effectively split us into two nations, or are they just cracks in a still-united whole?

BY DAVID BROOKS

Illustrations by Guy Billout

.....

Sixty-five miles from where I am writing this sentence is a place with no Starbucks, no Pottery Barn, no Borders or Barnes & Noble. No blue *New York Times* delivery bags dot the driveways on Sunday mornings. In this place people don't complain that Woody Allen isn't as funny as he used to be, because they never thought he was funny. In this place you can go to a year's worth of dinner parties without hearing anyone quote an aperçu he first heard on *Charlie Rose*. The people here don't buy those little rear-window stickers when they go to a summer-vacation spot so that they can drive around with "MV" decals the rest of the year; for the most part they don't even go to Martha's Vineyard.

America the stores are small but the markups are big. You'll rarely see a Christmas store in Blue America, but in Red America, even in July, you'll come upon stores selling fake Christmas trees, wreath-decorated napkins, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer collectible thimbles and spoons, and little snow-covered villages.

We in the coastal metro Blue areas read more books and attend more plays than the people in the Red heartland. We're more sophisticated and cosmopolitan—just ask us about our alumni trips to China or Provence, or our interest in Buddhism. But don't ask us, please, what life in Red America is like. We don't know. We don't know who Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are, even though the novels

EVENLY DIVIDED AND INCREASINGLY POLARIZED



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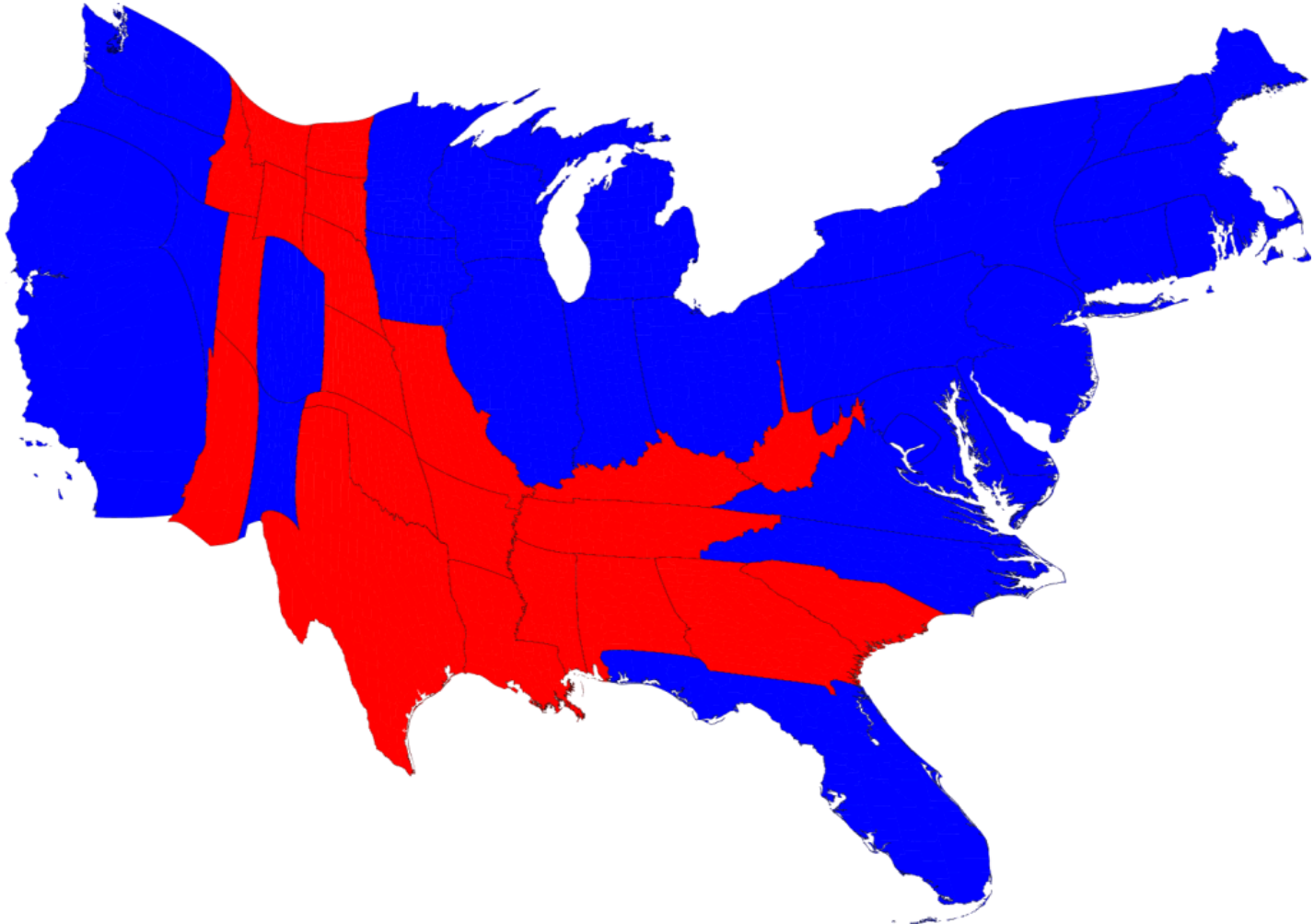
THE BIG SORT



WHY THE
CLUSTERING OF
LIKE-MINDED
AMERICA IS
TEARING US APART

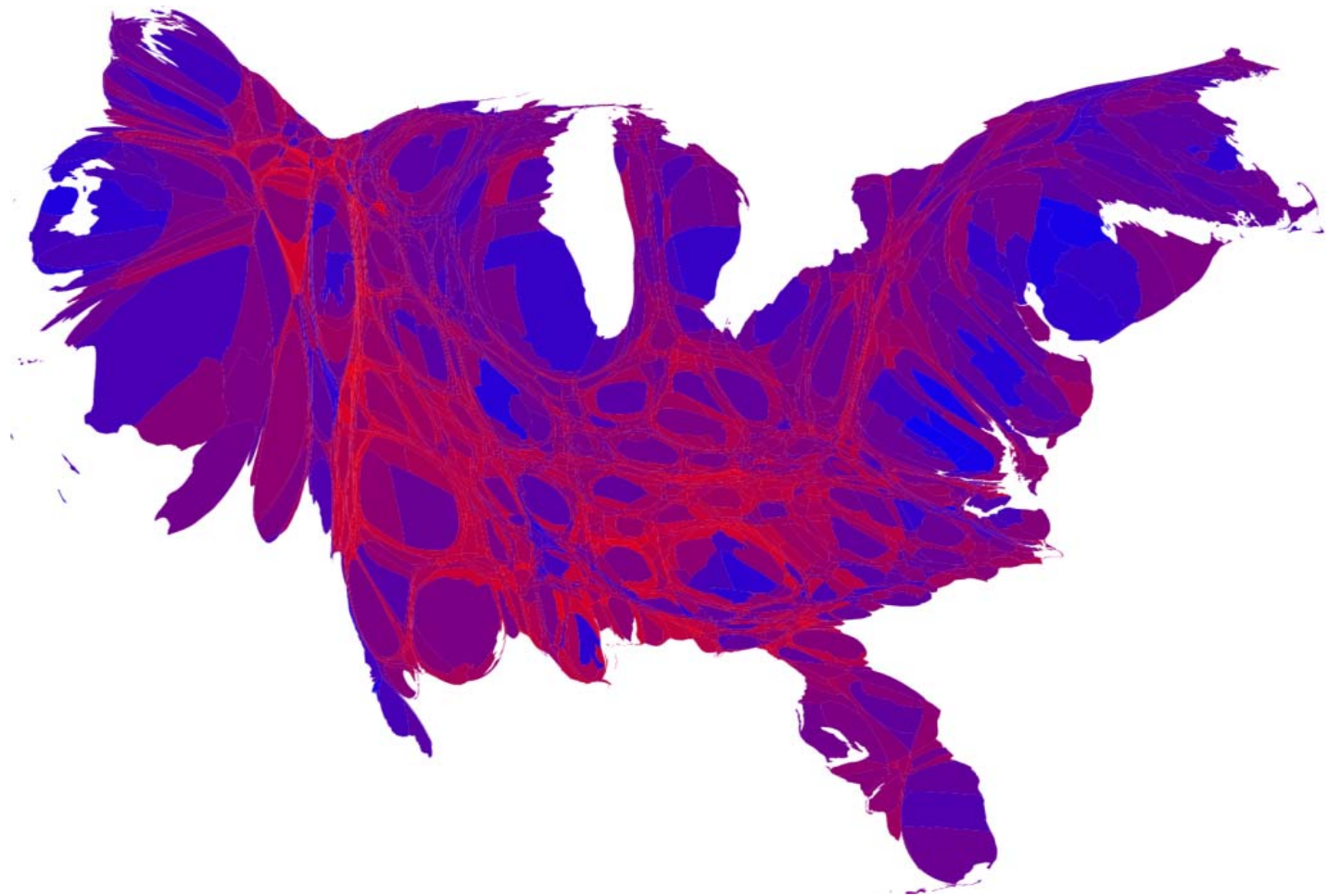


BILL
BISHOP



The evidence against polarization

The electoral map is mostly purple



The evidence against polarization

Close elections with reliably blue and red states \neq polarization of views

Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?¹

Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson
Princeton University

Many observers have asserted with little evidence that Americans' social opinions have become polarized. Using General Social Survey and National Election Survey social attitude items that have been repeated regularly over 20 years, the authors ask (1) Have Americans' opinions become more dispersed (higher variance)? (2) Have distributions become flatter or more bimodal (declining kurtosis)? (3) Have opinions become more ideologically constrained within and across opinion domains? (4) Have paired social groups become more different in their opinions? The authors find little evidence of polarization over the past two decades, with attitudes toward abortion and opinion differences between Republican and Democratic party identifiers the exceptional cases.

**ONE
NATION,
AFTER
ALL**

ALAN WOLFE

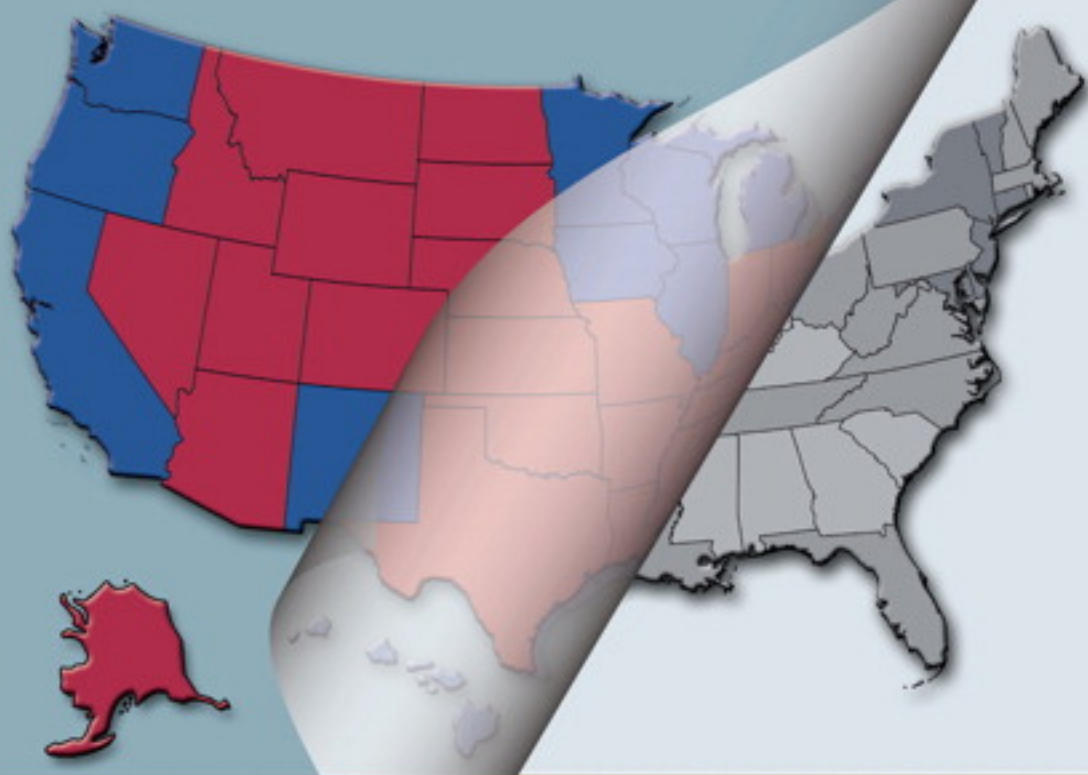
WHAT
MIDDLE-CLASS
AMERICANS
REALLY THINK
ABOUT: GOD,
COUNTRY,
FAMILY,
RACISM,
WELFARE,
IMMIGRATION,
HOMOSEXUALITY,
WORK,
THE RIGHT,
THE LEFT,
AND EACH OTHER

V I K I N G

GREAT QUESTIONS IN POLITICS SERIES

Culture War?

The Myth of a Polarized America

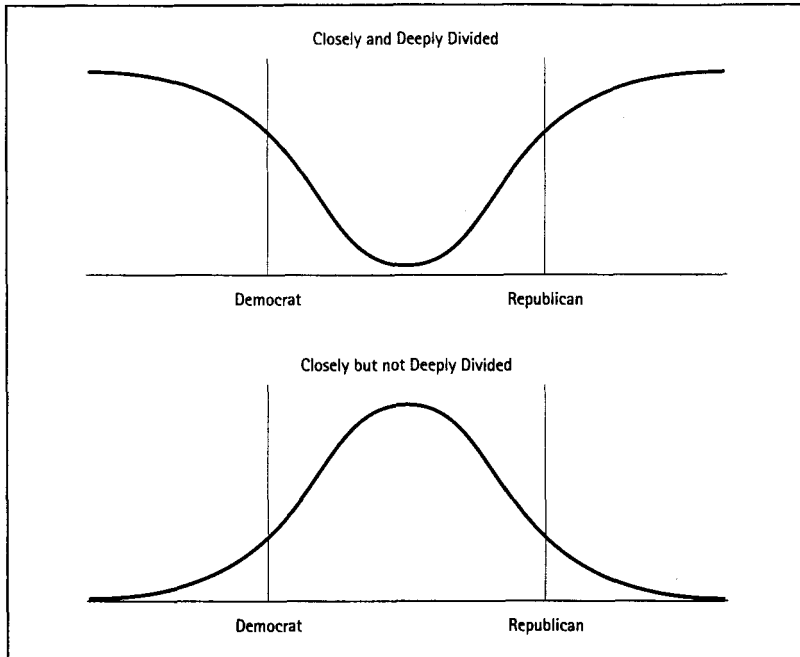


MORRIS P. FIORINA

with SAMUEL J. ABRAMS and JEREMY C. POPE

FIGURE 2.1

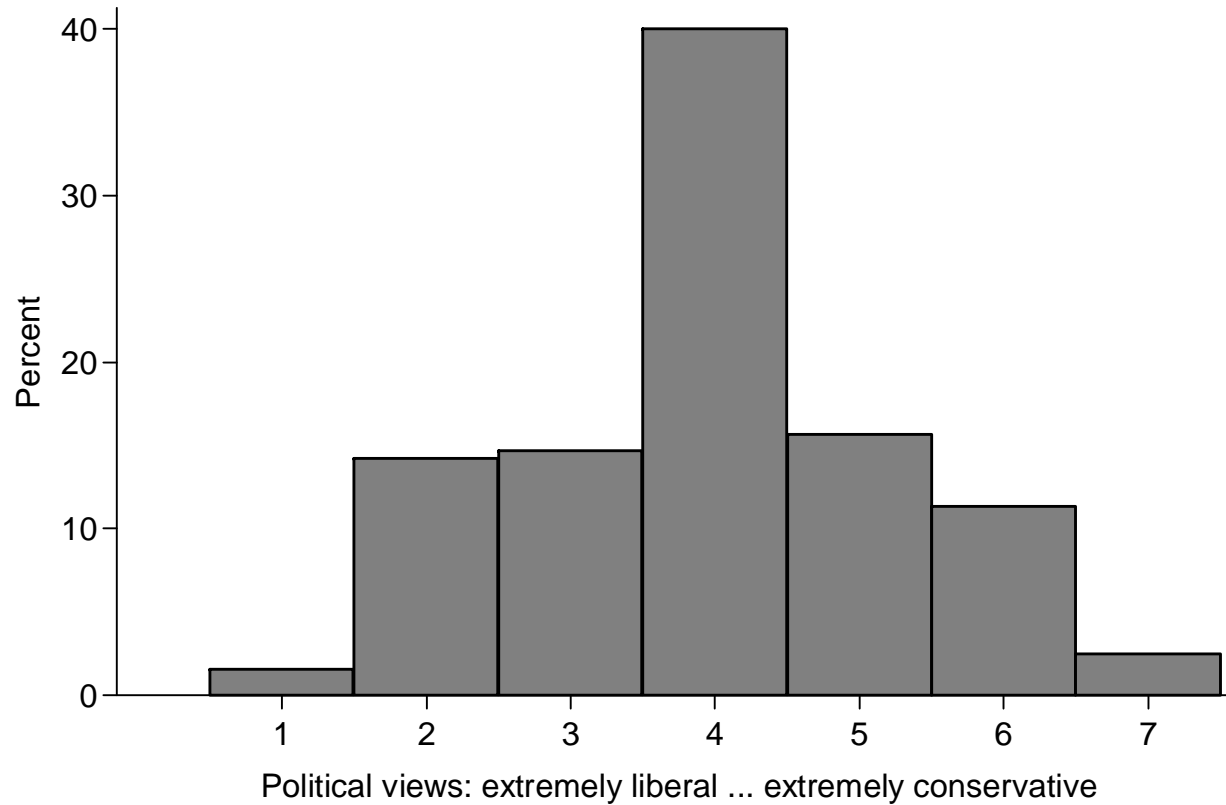
Two Very Different Close Election Scenarios



The evidence against polarization

GSS data offer little indication of polarization since the 1970s

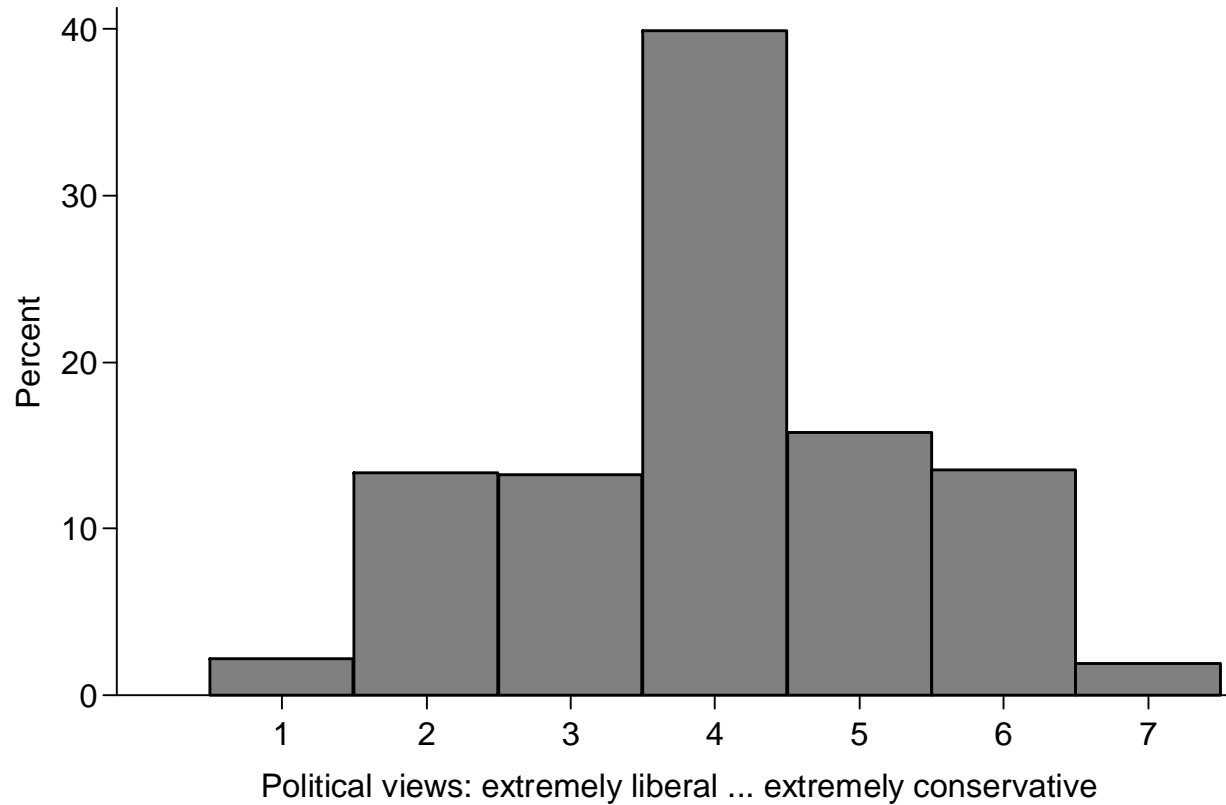
Political views: 1974



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

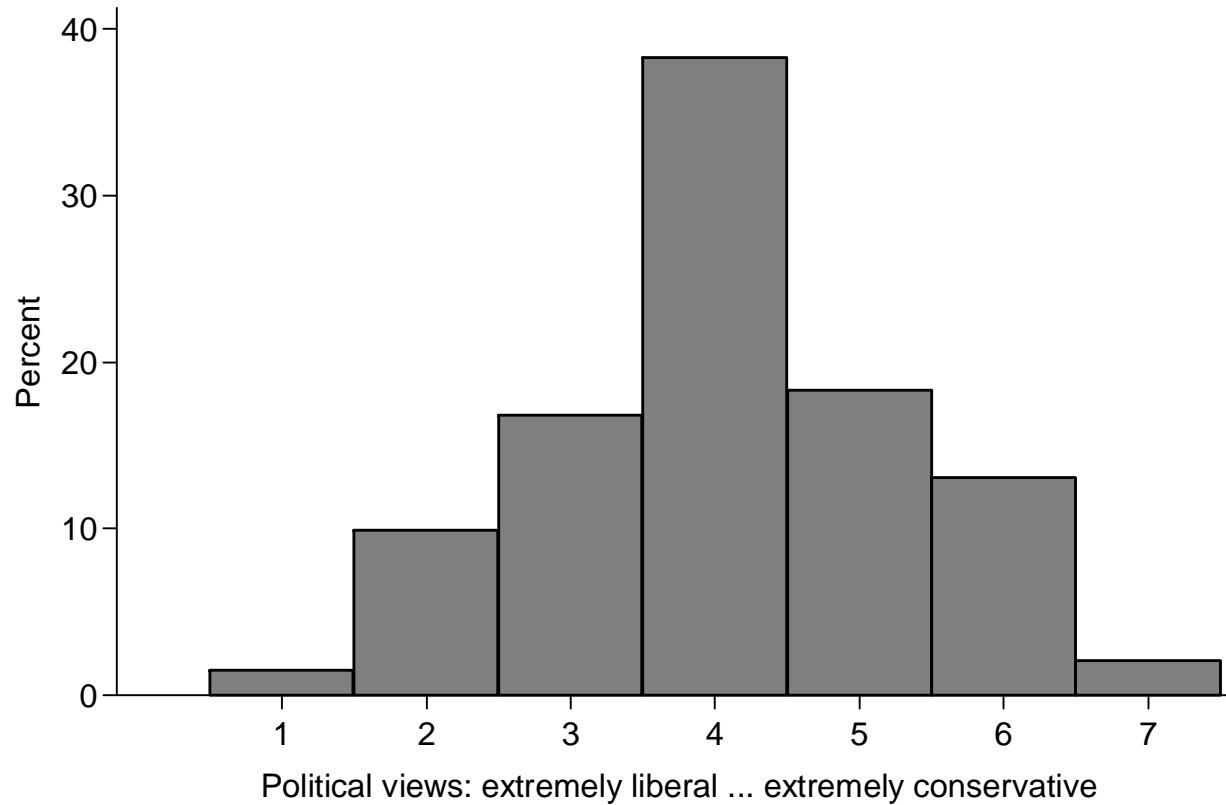
Political views: 1976



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

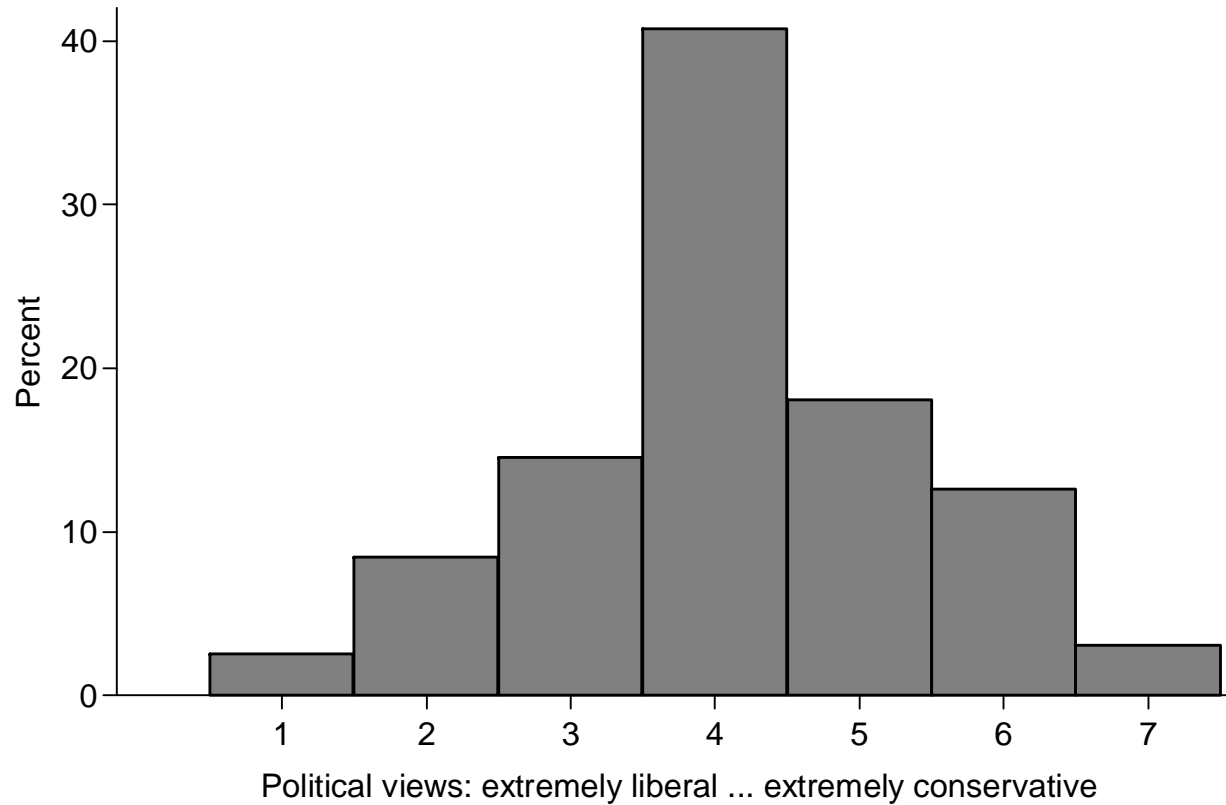
Political views: 1978



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

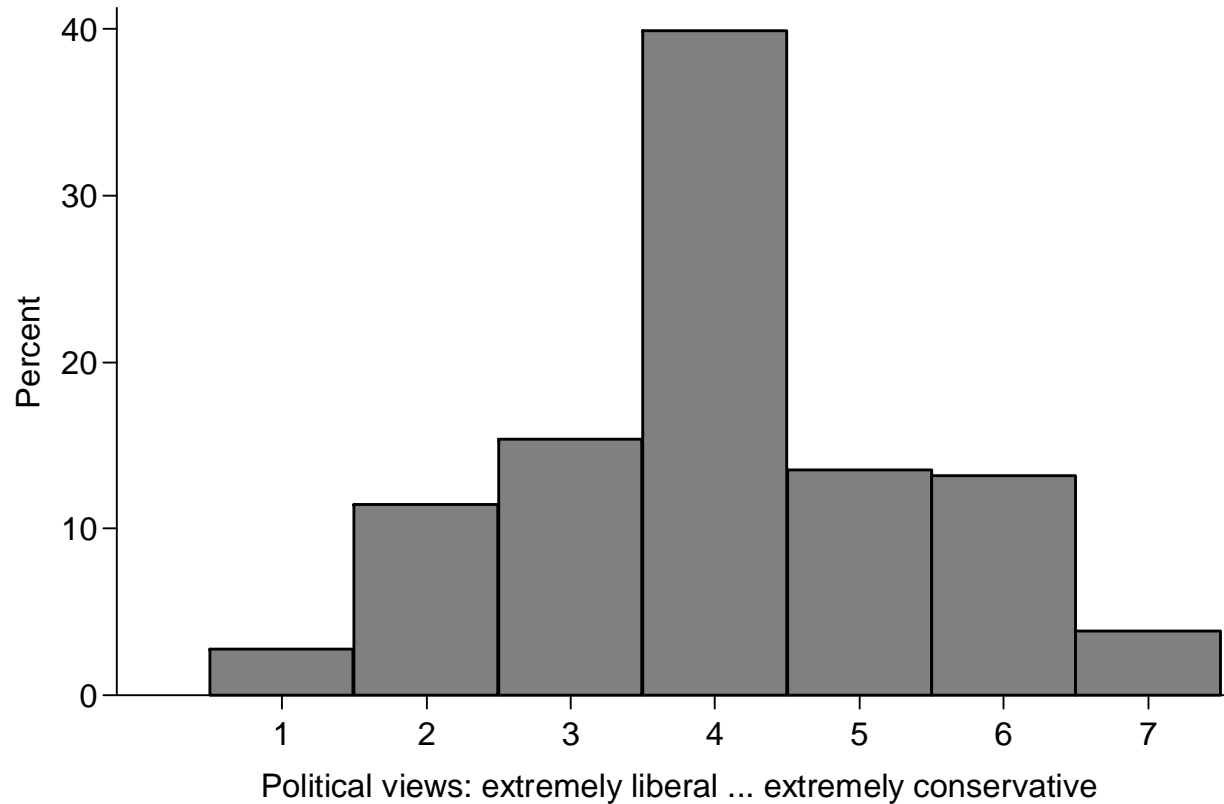
Political views: 1980



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

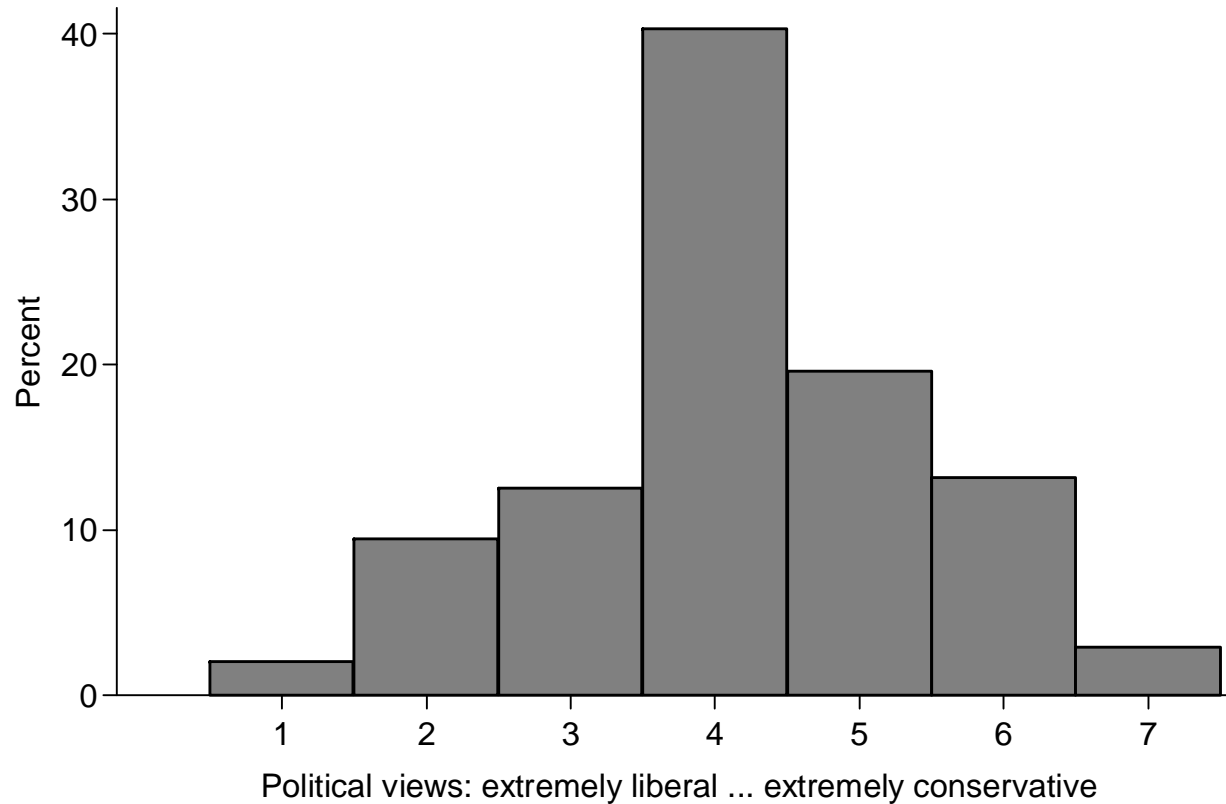
Political views: 1982



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

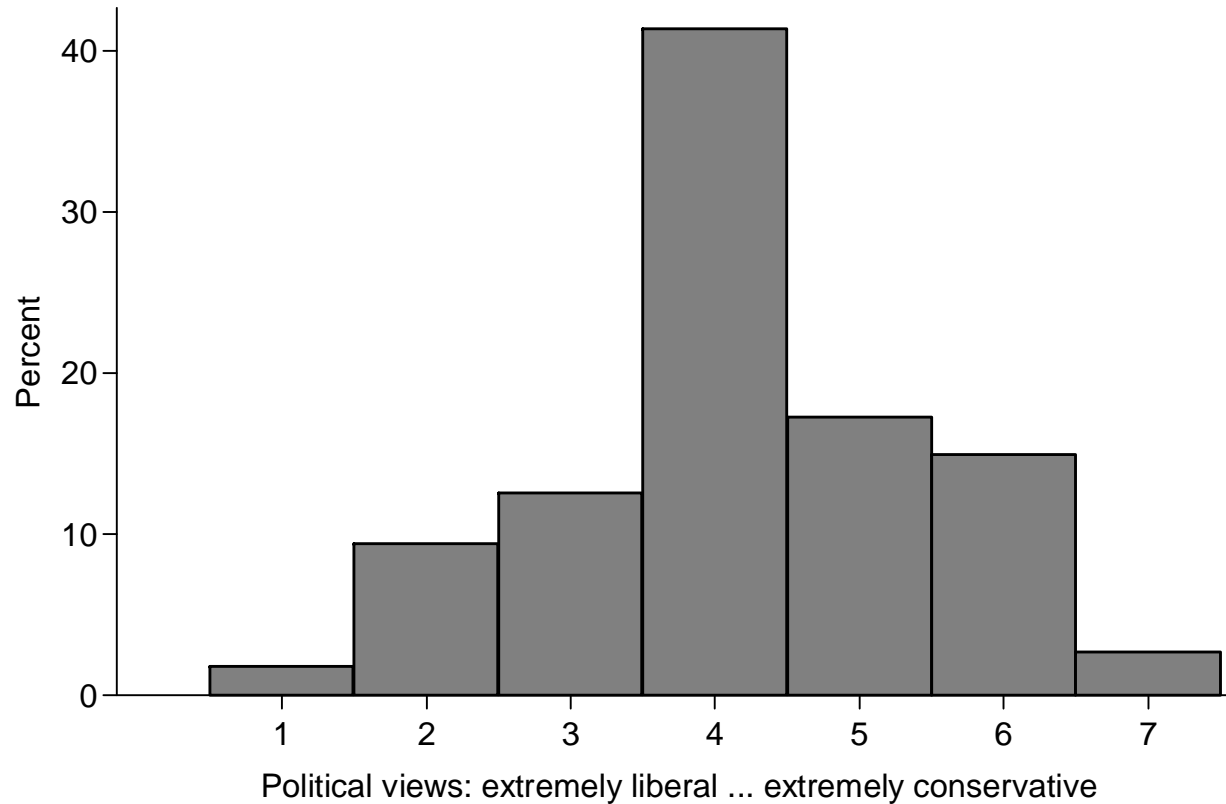
Political views: 1984



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

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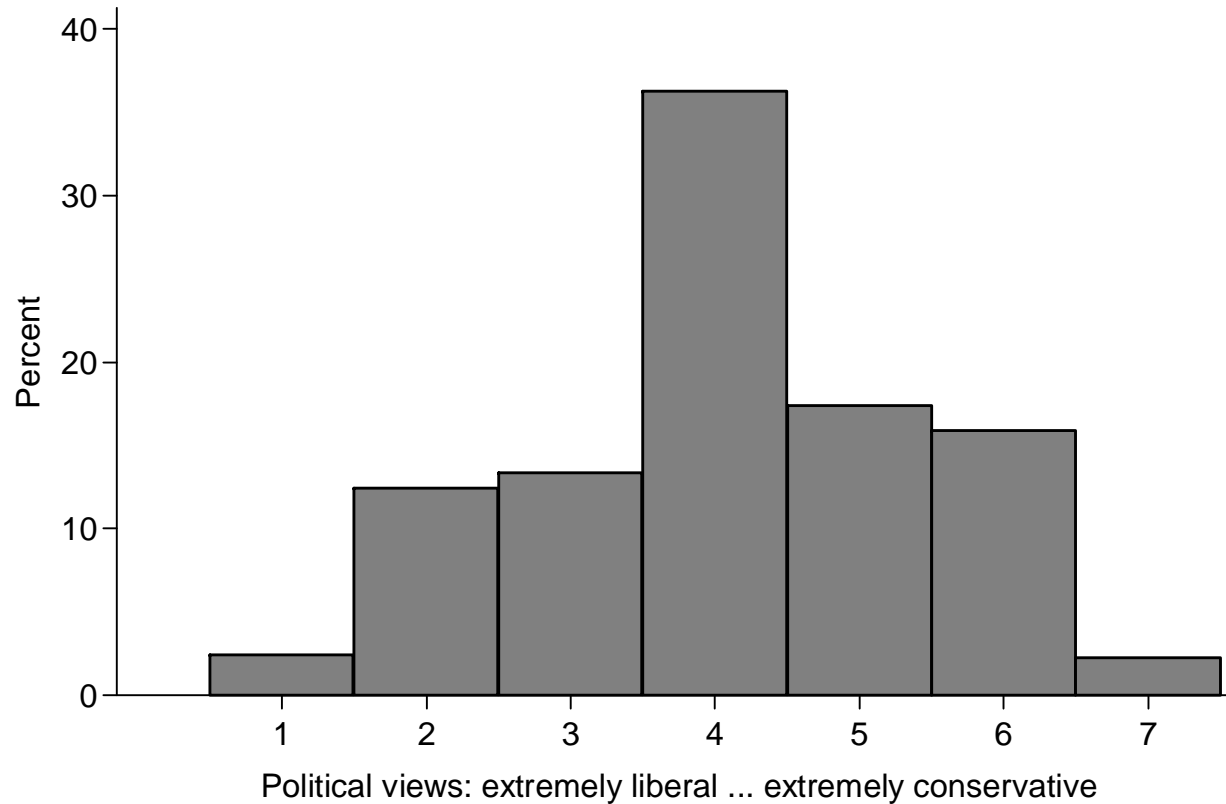
Political views: 1986



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

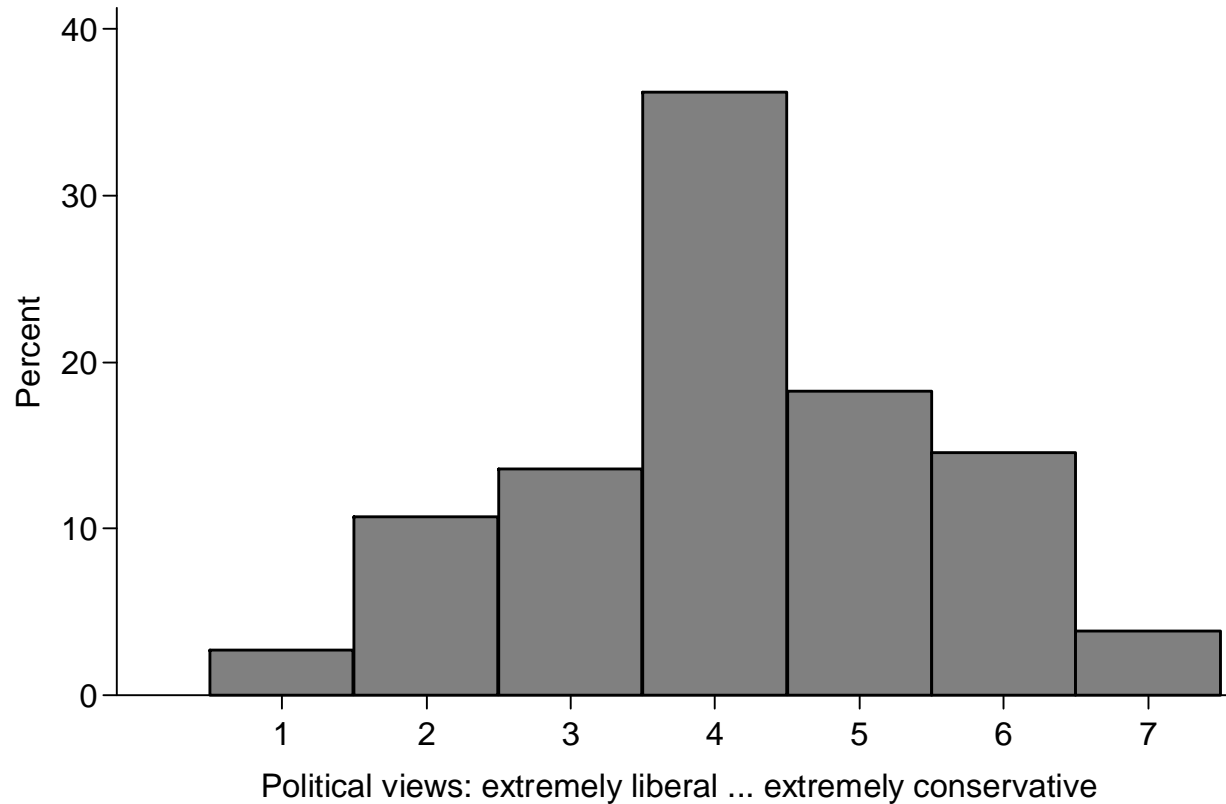
Political views: 1988



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

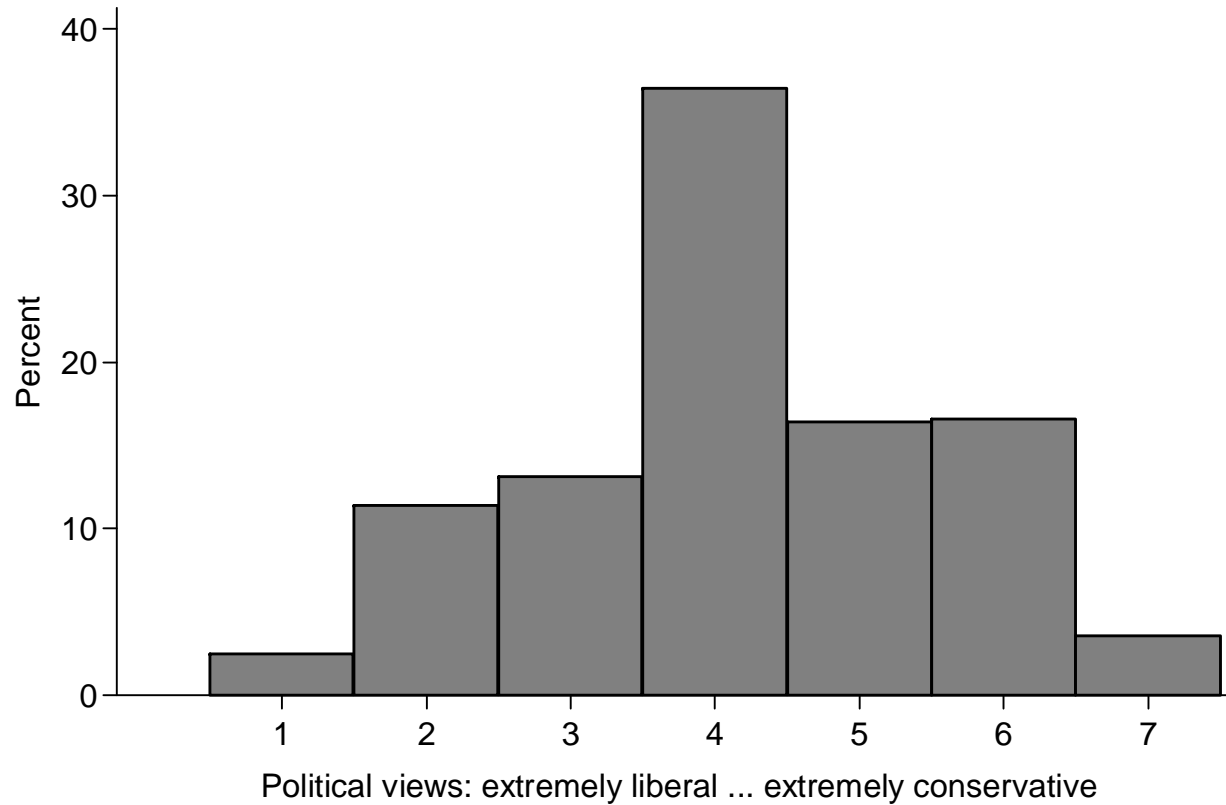
Political views: 1990



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

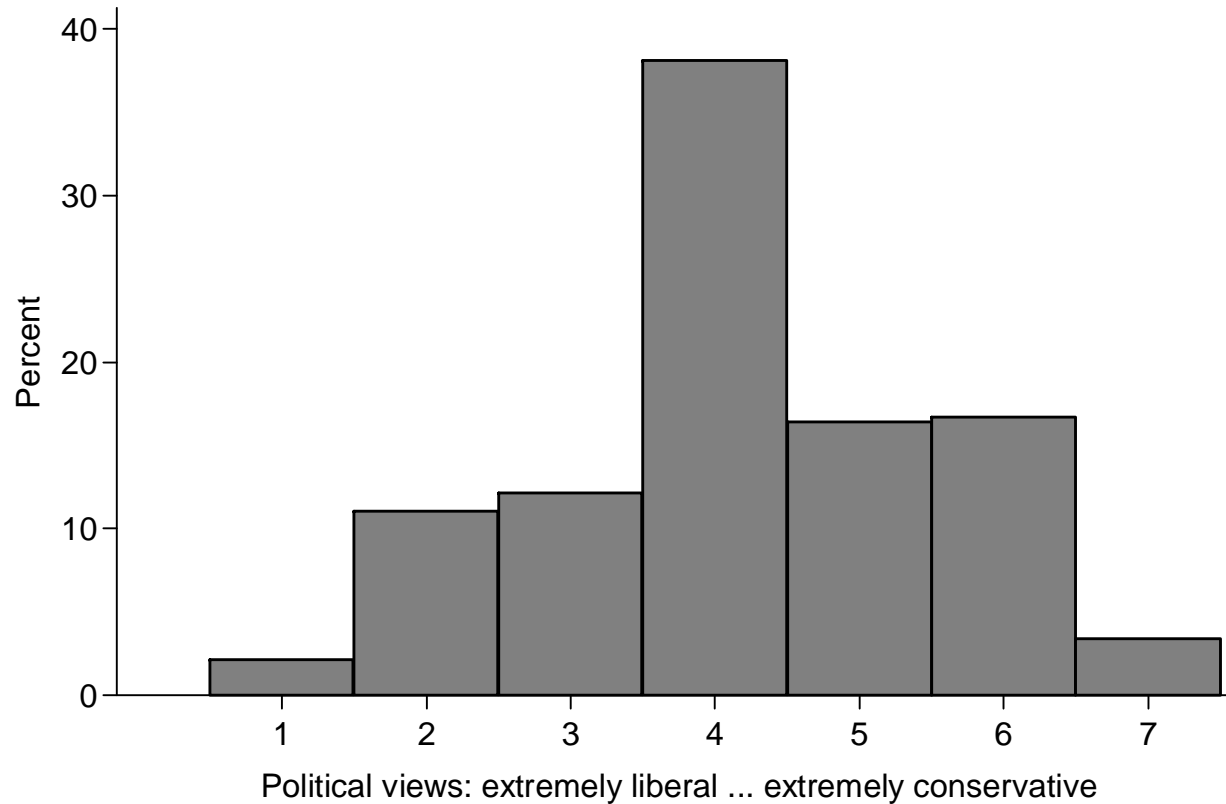
Political views: 1994



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

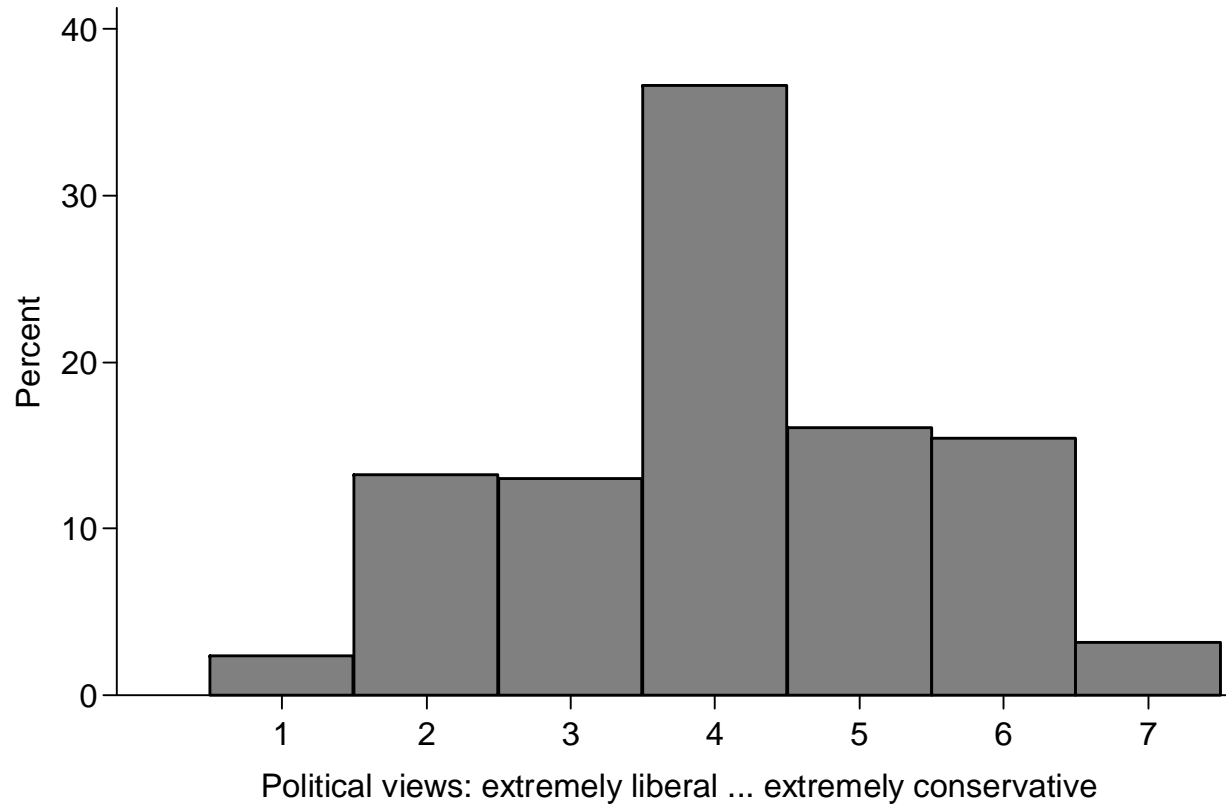
Political views: 1996



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

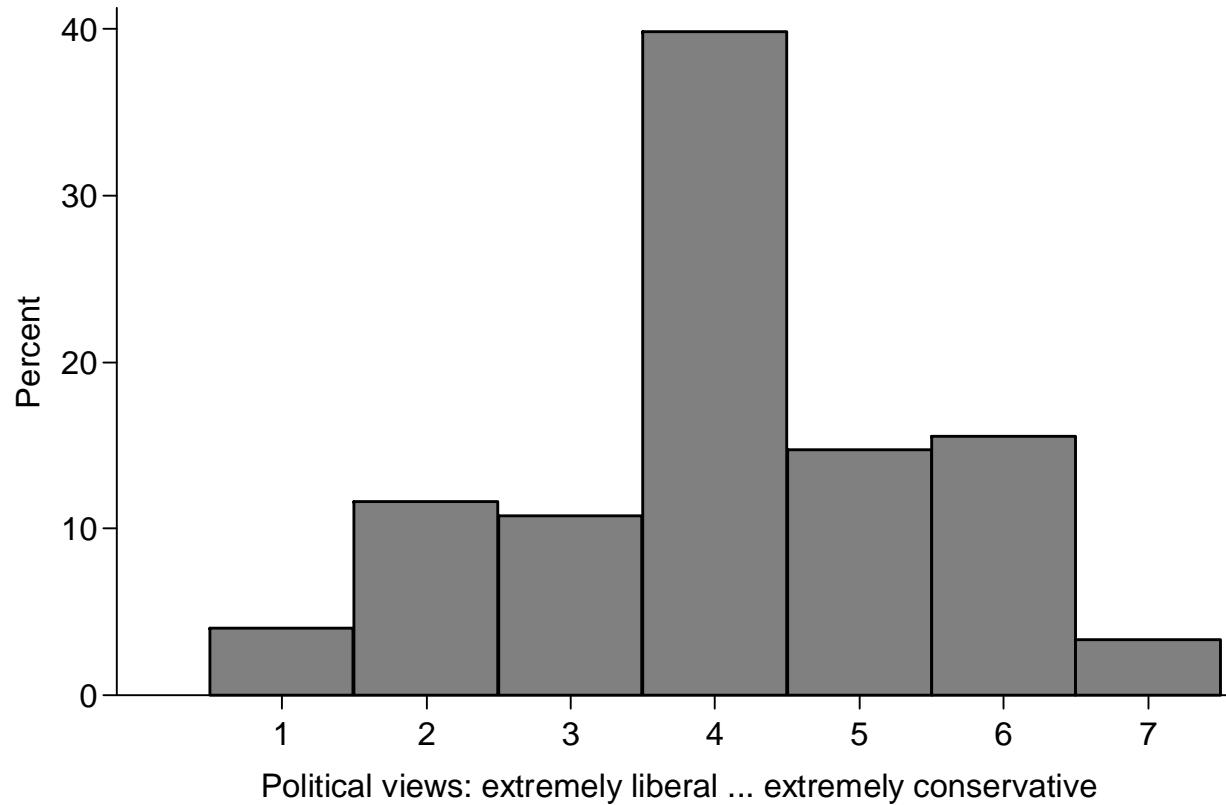
Political views: 1998



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

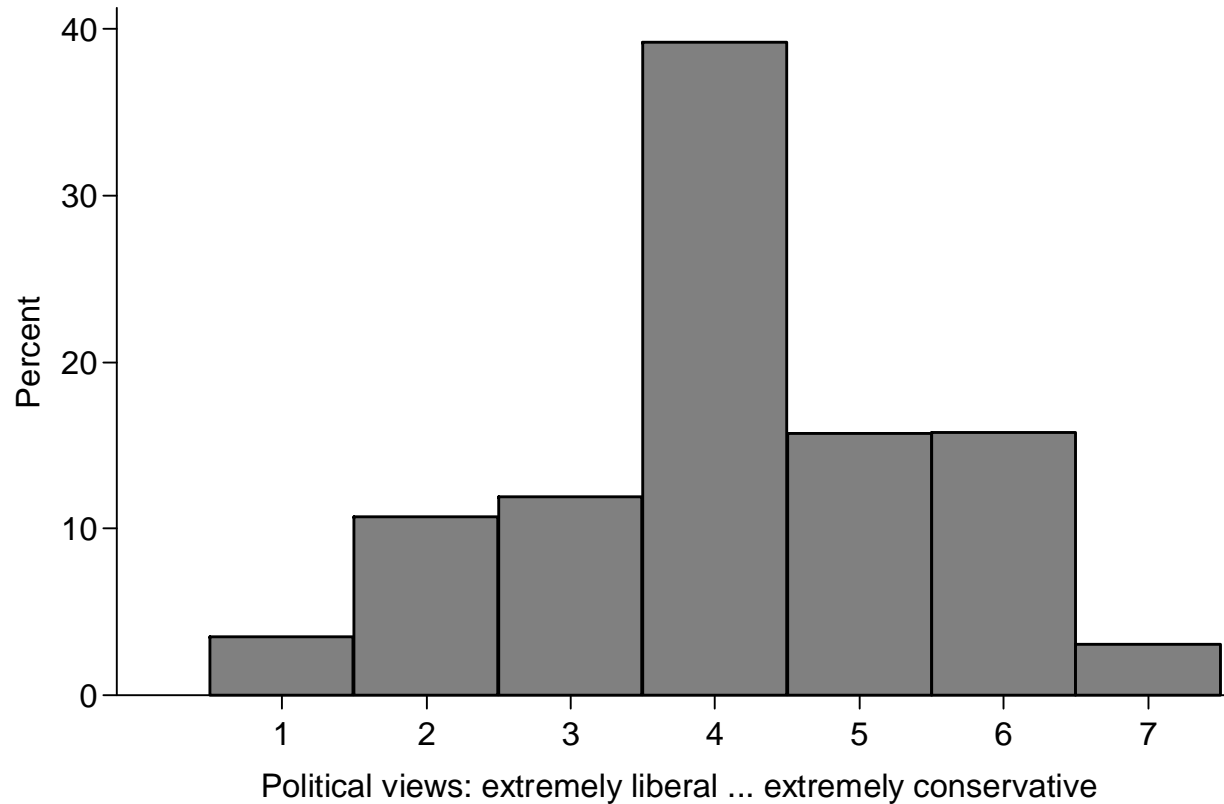
Political views: 2000



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

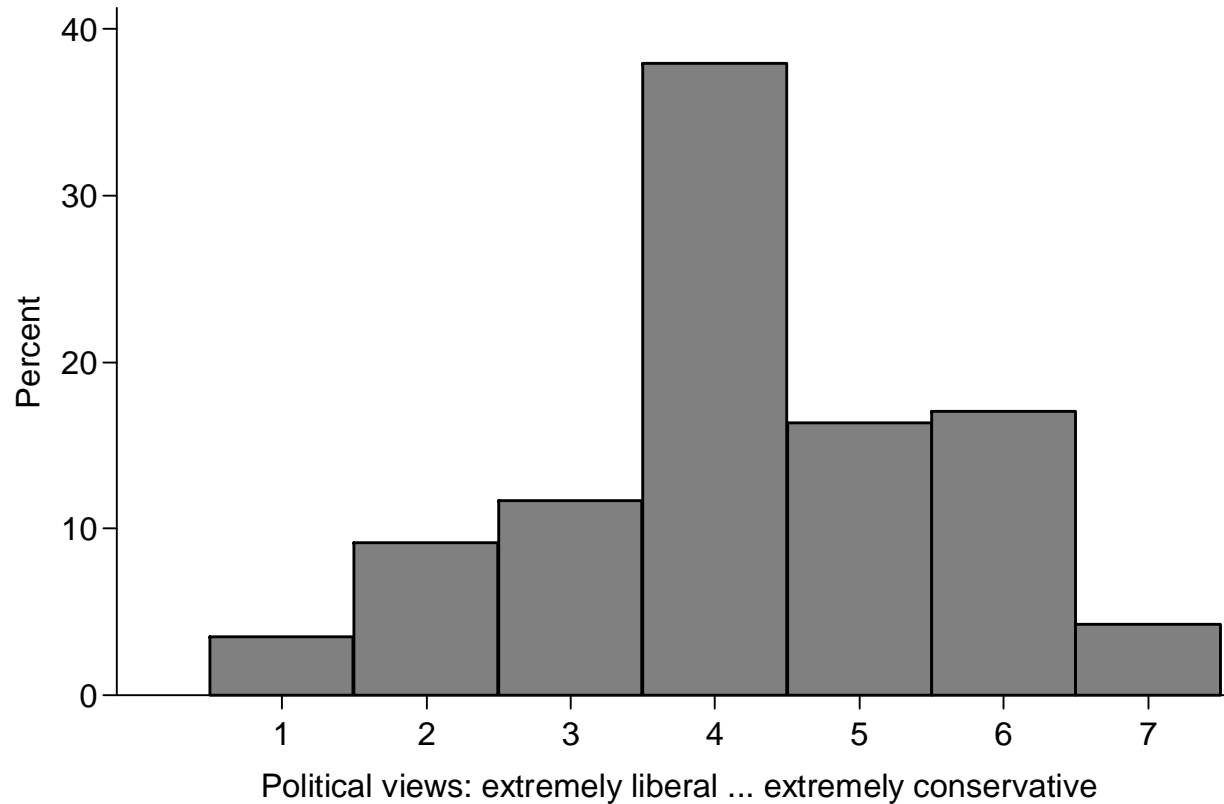
Political views: 2002



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

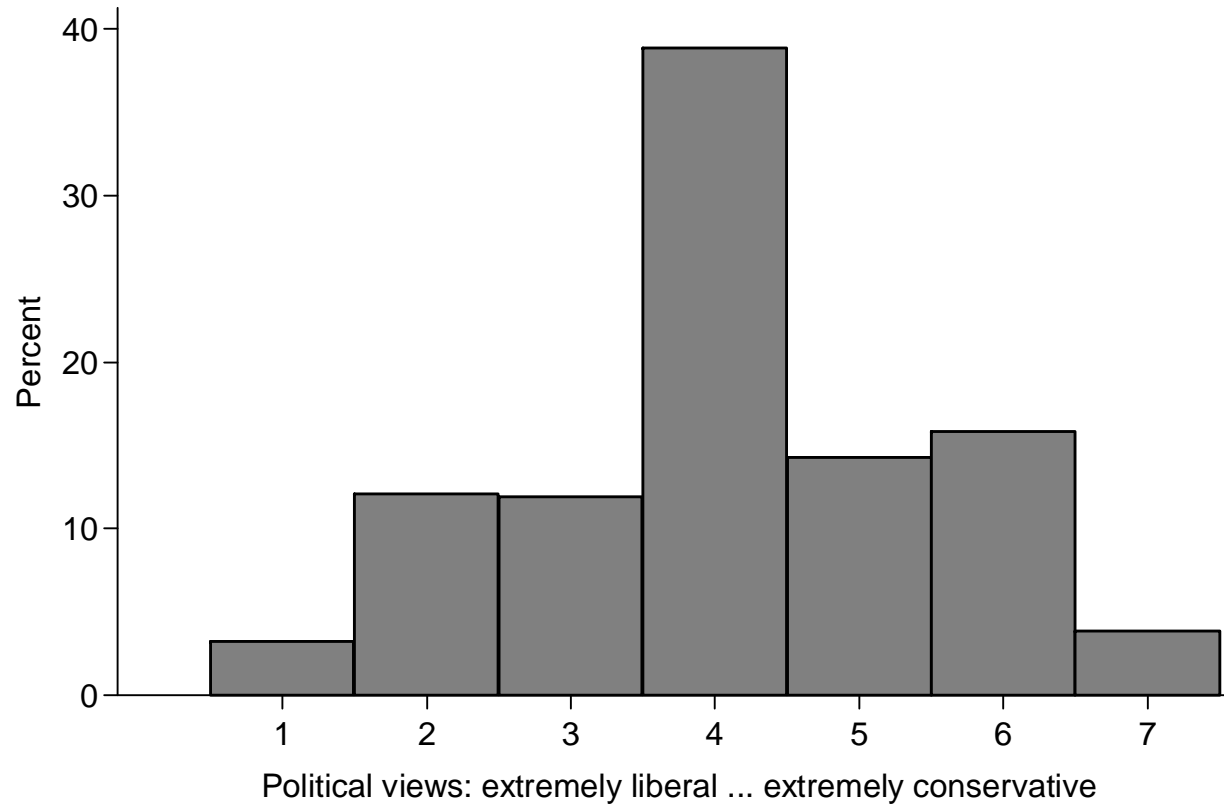
Political views: 2004



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

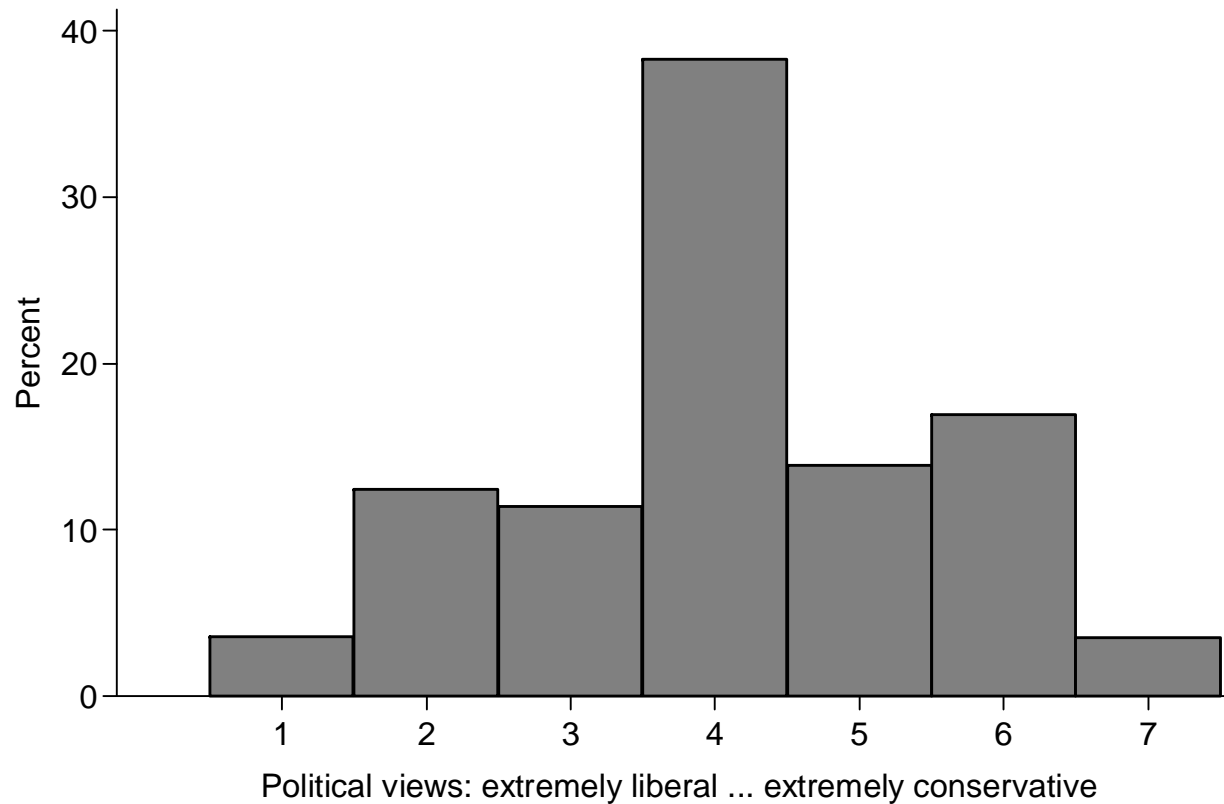
Political views: 2006



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

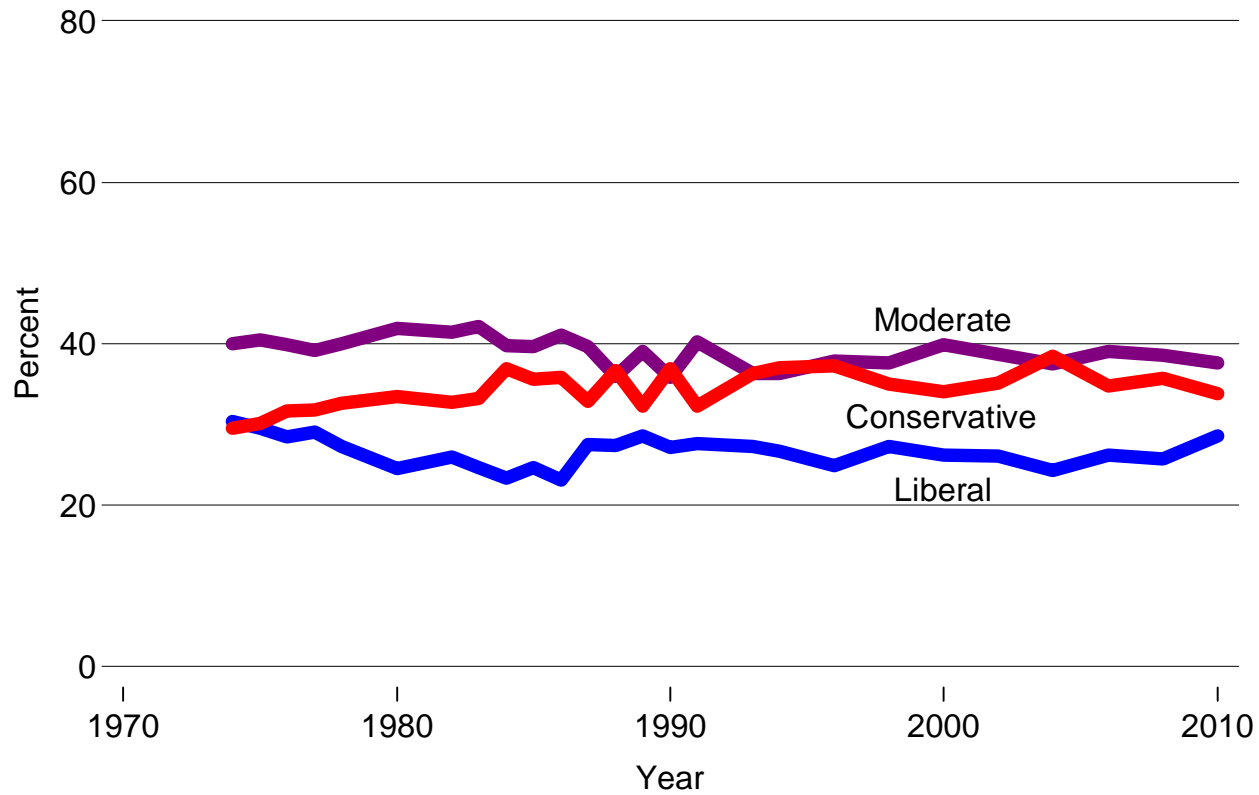
Political views: 2008



Note: 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

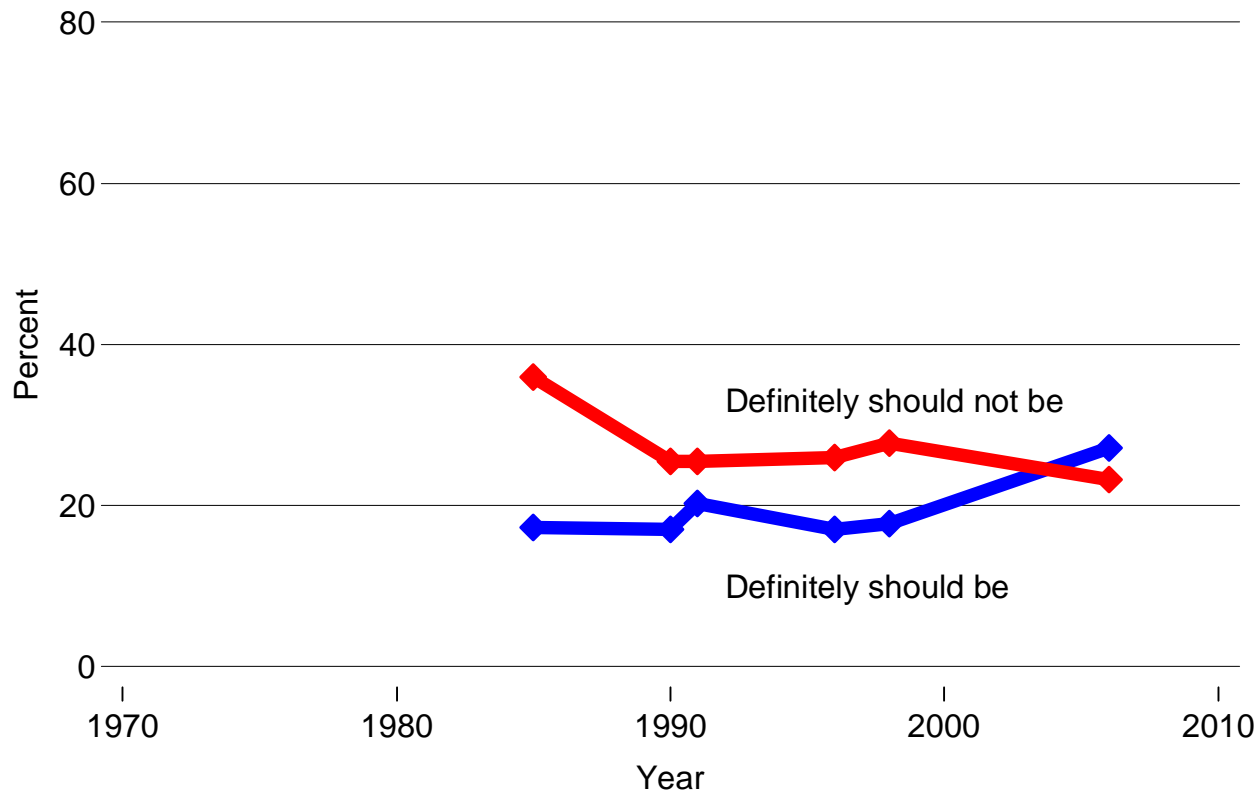
Source: My calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data, sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (variable polviews).

Political views



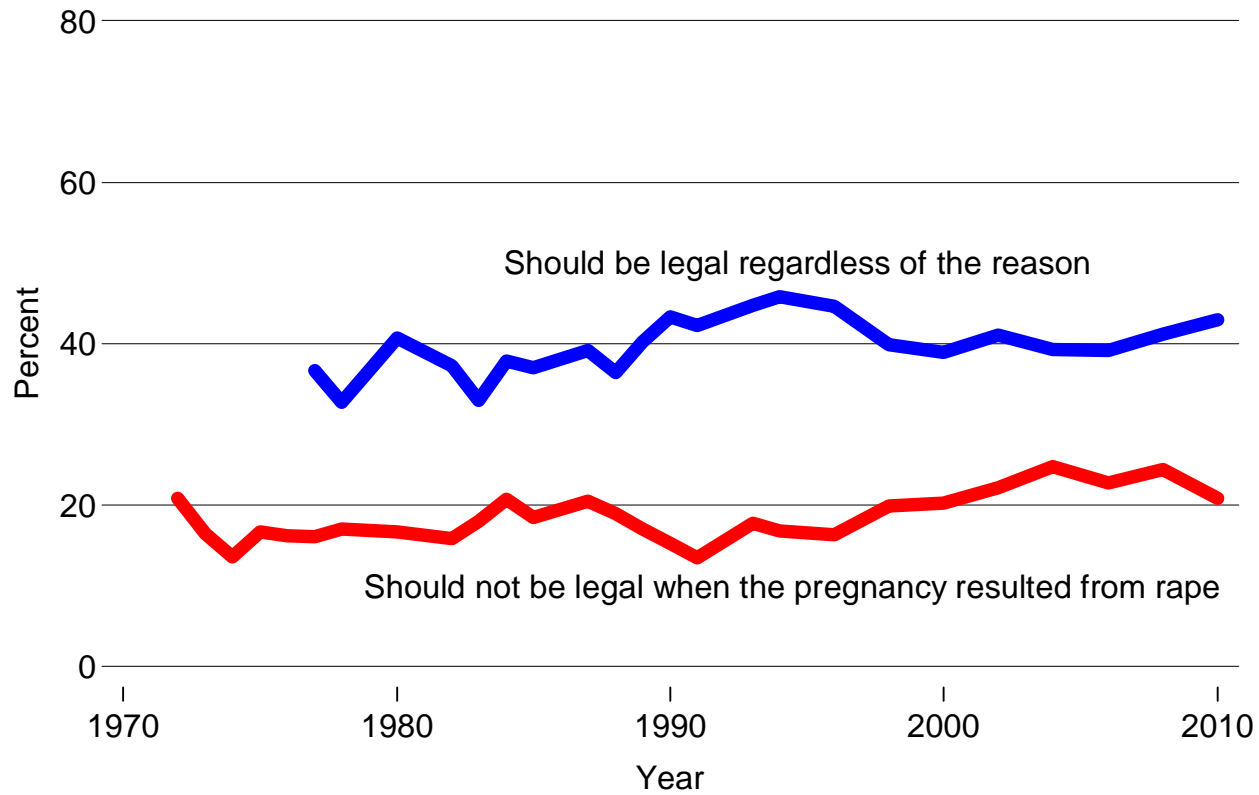
"Liberal" = extremely liberal, liberal, and slightly liberal; "moderate" = moderate; "conservative" = extremely conservative, conservative, and slightly conservative. Data source: General Social Survey (GSS), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm, variable = polviews.

It is government's responsibility to reduce income differences between rich and poor



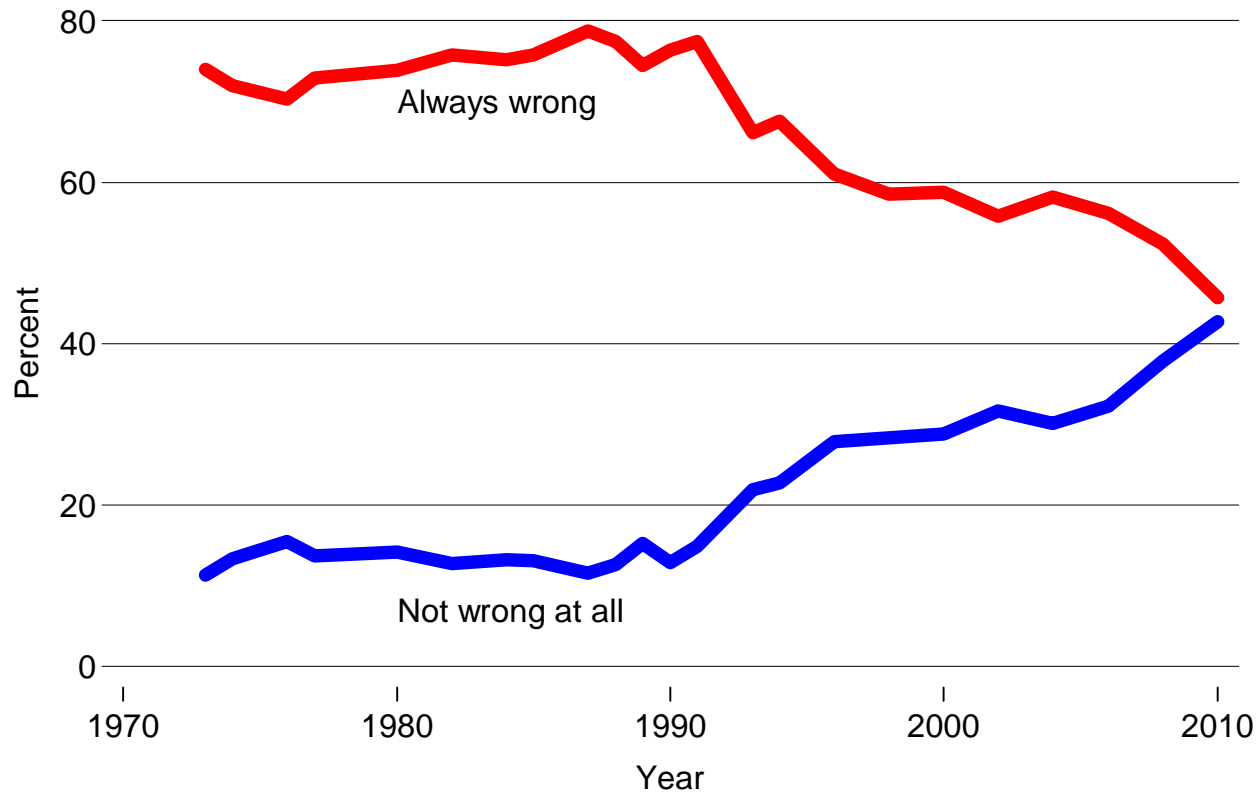
Other response options: probably should be, probably should not be. Data source: General Social Survey (GSS), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm, variable = equalize.

Abortion



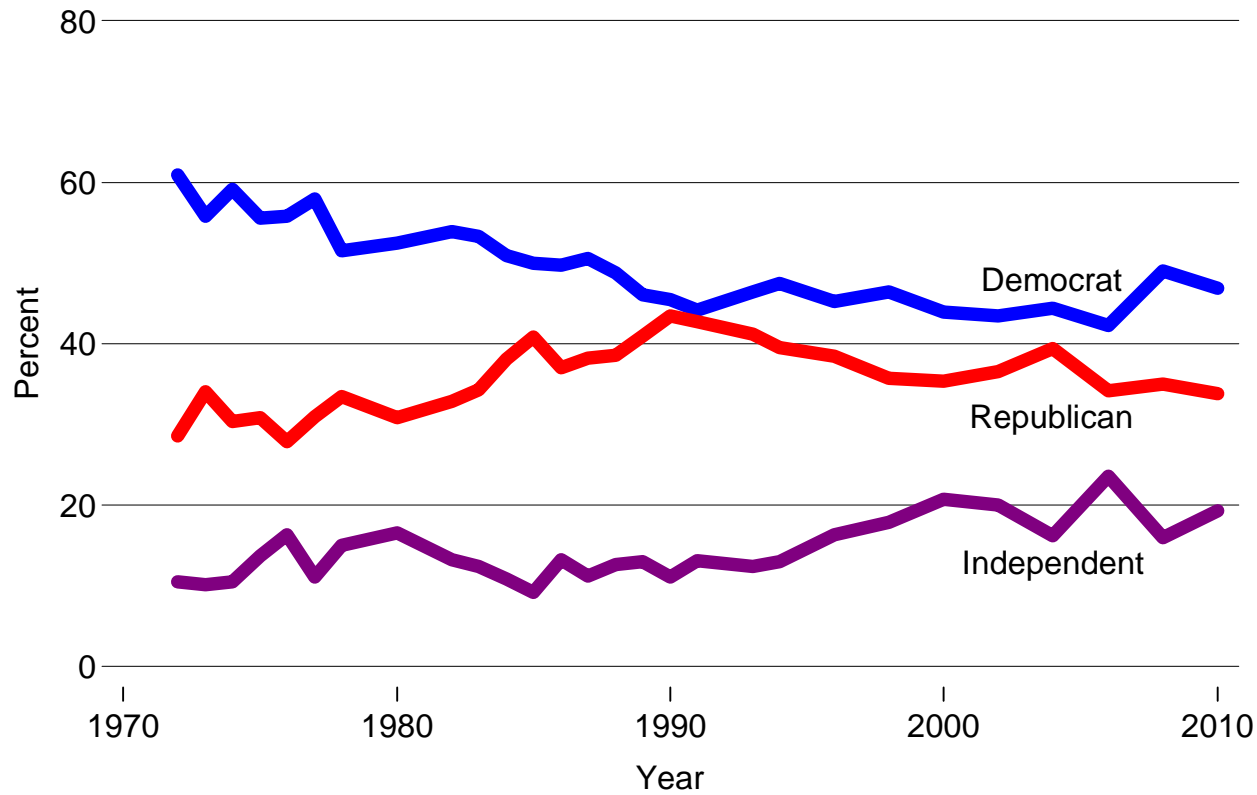
Data source: General Social Survey (GSS), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm, variables = abany, abrape.

Homosexuality



Other response options: almost always wrong, sometimes wrong. Data source: General Social Survey (GSS), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm, variable = homosex.

Party identification



"Democrat" = strong Democrat, not strong Democrat, and independent leaning Democrat; "independent" = independent; "Republican" = strong Republican, not strong Republican, and independent leaning Republican. Those choosing "other party" are not included here. Data source: General Social Survey (GSS), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm, variable = partyid.

**People's views on issues
now map better with their
party preference**

People's views on issues now map better with their party preference

The two parties now have clearer views on key issues

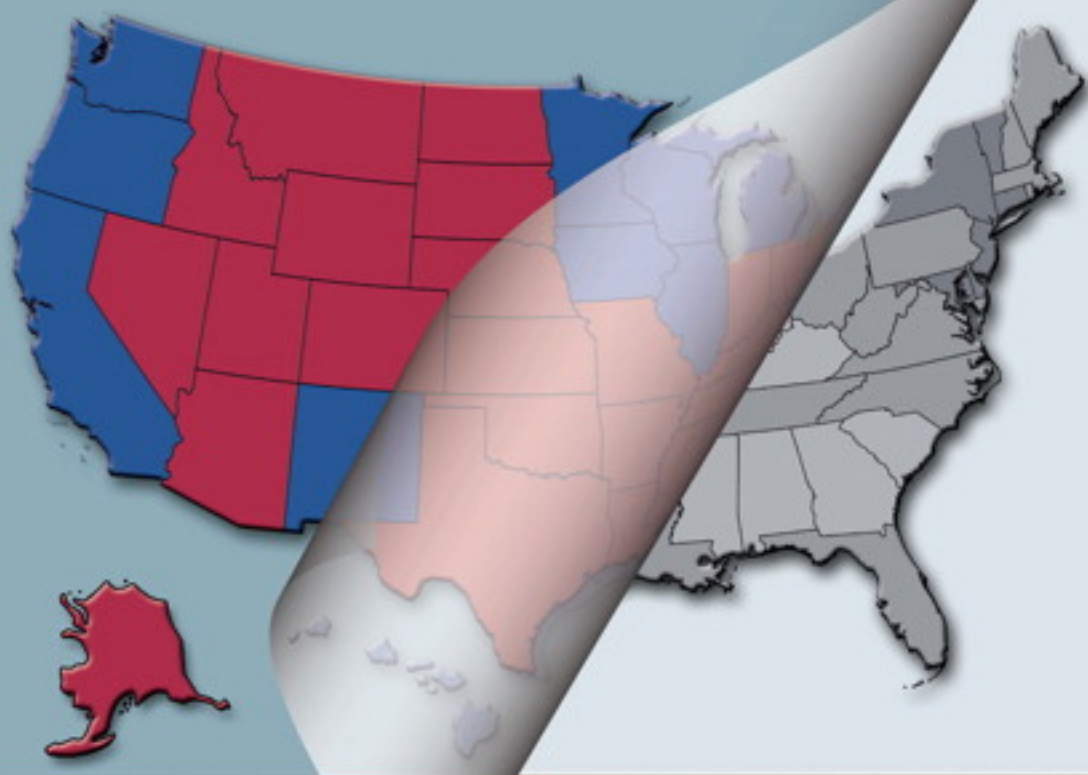
Americans have sorted themselves more cleanly into these parties

This is a result partly of the erosion of the Civil War's legacy in the south, which has allowed conservative southerners to identify as Republican

GREAT QUESTIONS IN POLITICS SERIES

Culture War?

The Myth of a Polarized America



MORRIS P. FIORINA

with SAMUEL J. ABRAMS and JEREMY C. POPE

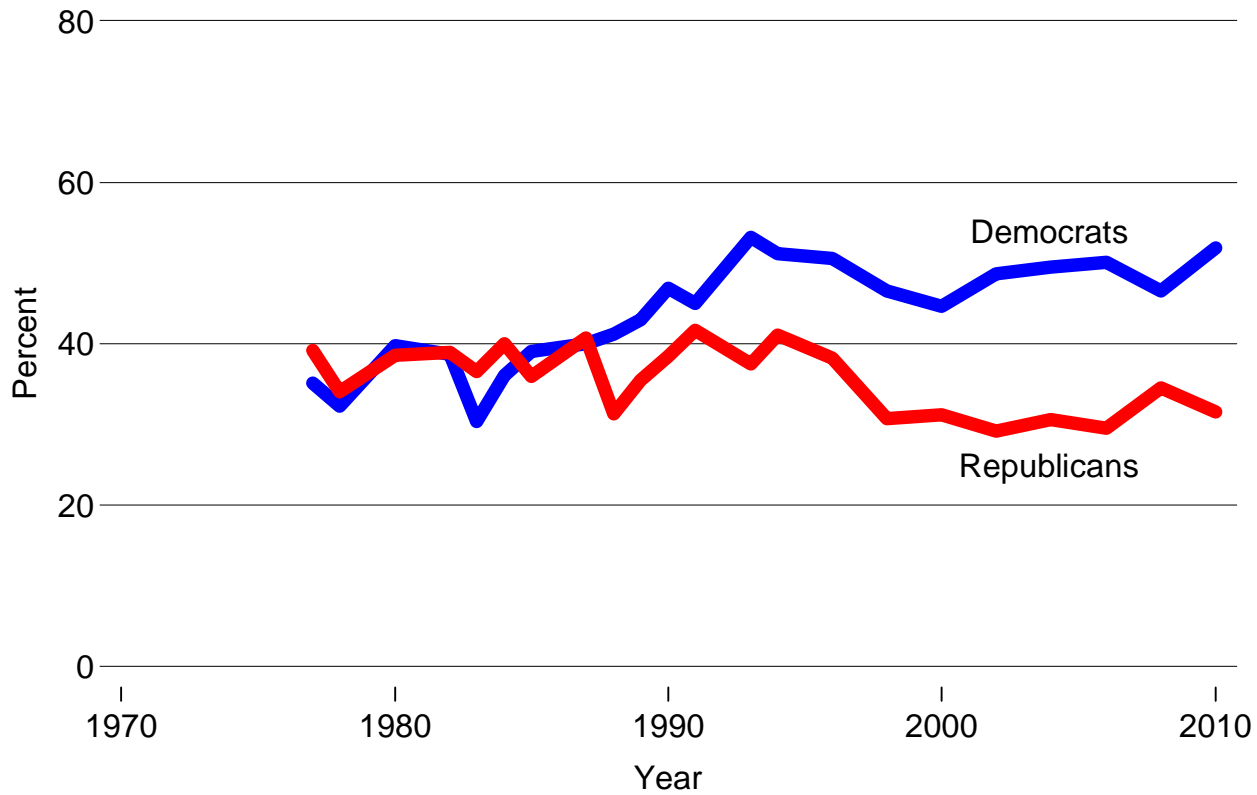
Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion¹

Delia Baldassarri
Princeton University

Andrew Gelman
Columbia University

Public opinion polarization is here conceived as a process of alignment along multiple lines of potential disagreement and measured as growing constraint in individuals' preferences. Using NES data from 1972 to 2004, the authors model trends in issue partisanship—the correlation of issue attitudes with party identification—and issue alignment—the correlation between pairs of issues—and find a substantive increase in issue partisanship, but little evidence of issue alignment. The findings suggest that opinion changes correspond more to a resorting of party labels among voters than to greater constraint on issue attitudes: since parties are more polarized, they are now better at sorting individuals along ideological lines. Levels of constraint vary across population subgroups: strong partisans and wealthier and politically sophisticated voters have grown more coherent in their beliefs. The authors discuss the consequences of partisan realignment and group sorting on the political process and potential deviations from the classic pluralistic account of American politics.

Abortion legal regardless of the reason



Share responding "yes" abortion should be legal regardless of the reason the woman wants it. Data source: General Social Survey (GSS), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm, variable = abany.

**The parties have become
more polarized**



27:24

180x40x8

80x31



POLARIZED AMERICA

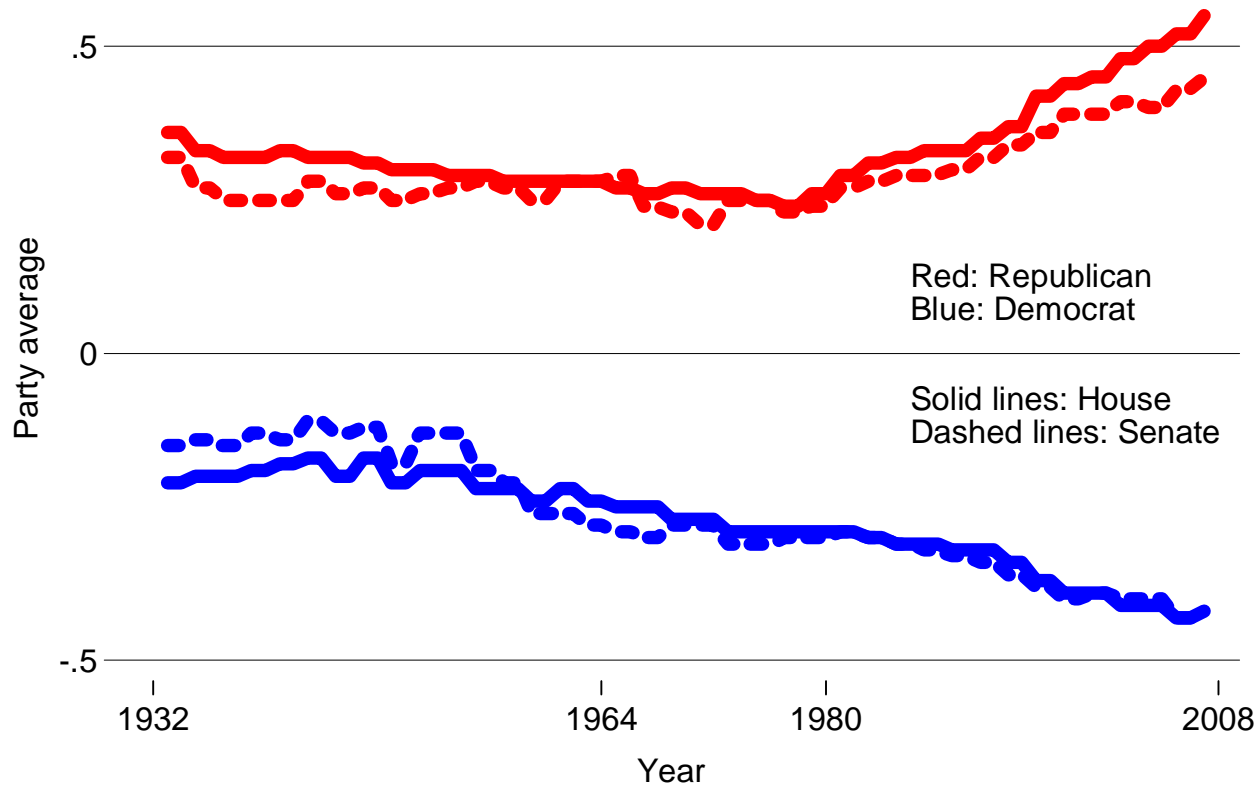
The Dance of Ideology
and Unequal Riches

Nolan McCarty Keith T. Poole Howard Rosenthal

80x31



The parties have become more polarized



Scores are based on votes cast. The scale runs from liberal (low scores) to conservative (high scores). Data source: Royce Carroll, Jeff Lewis, James Lo, Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, DW-nominate scores, voteview.com/dwnomin.htm.

Entire U.S.

Voters

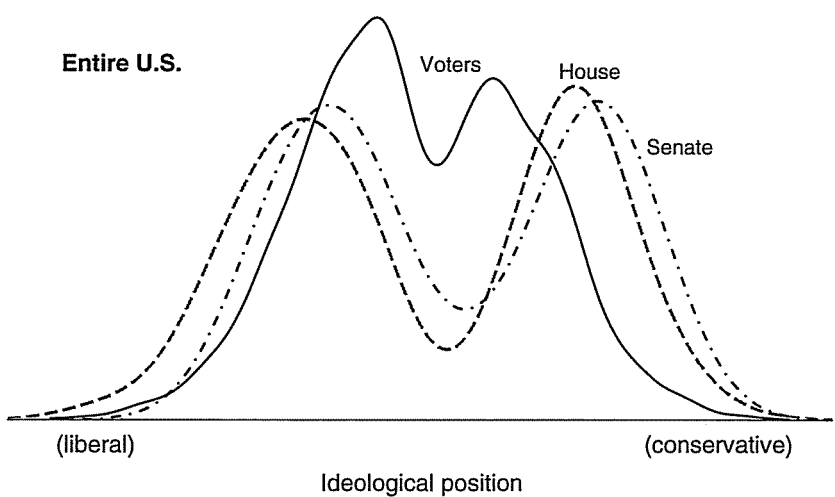
House

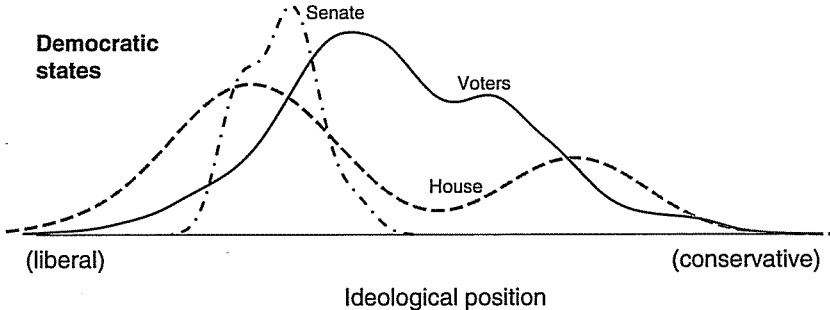
Senate

(liberal)

(conservative)

Ideological position



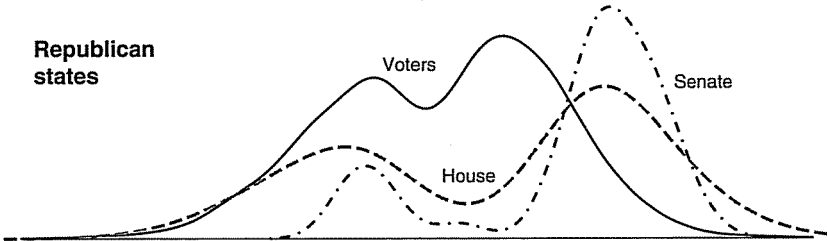


**Republican
states**

Voters

Senate

House



The parties have become more polarized

Why?

The fading of the Democrats' post-Civil War dominance in the south

The parties have become more polarized

Why?

The nature of the U.S. electoral system

Winner-take-all primaries and general election

Candidate system with incumbency advantages

The effect is accentuated by geographic sorting on the basis of political views and by creation of safe seats via redistricting (redrawing of House district maps every ten years)

Is party polarization bad?

Is party polarization bad?

An advantage of polarization: politicians can't hide from what their party does, so citizens have a better sense of what they're likely to get when they vote

Is party polarization bad?

The hypothesized disadvantage: gridlock

Is party polarization bad?

In many other democratic countries parties almost always vote as a bloc, and it doesn't seem to produce excessive gridlock

Is party polarization bad?

But few other countries have the extreme separation of powers and extensive "veto points" that the United States does

- Separate executive and legislative

- Two equal legislative bodies

- The filibuster practice in the Senate, which requires a supermajority (60 votes) to pass legislation

Given these political institutions, having two polarized parties of roughly equal popularity is a recipe for gridlock

Is party polarization bad?

What would help

End the filibuster

Allocate more decision-making authority to appointed-but-independent bodies, as we currently do with the Supreme Court and the Federal Reserve (Fed) and will do, beginning in 2015, with the Medicare Independent Payment Advisory Board (IPAB)

Is party polarization bad?

What probably wouldn't help

A third (or fourth or fifth) major political party

Summary

Summary

Americans have not polarized politically

But the two parties have

This can be a good thing in terms of representation, but in the context of America's political institutions it makes gridlock much more likely