

The Three Worlds of Postwar American Politics
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This incarnation of the Ruth K. and Shepard Broad Distinguished Lecture Series comes at the intersection of a number of auspicious events:

- We find ourselves celebrating Shepard Broad, of course, immigrant, attorney, banker, philanthropist, whose Shepard Broad Foundation has institutionalized his devotion to South Florida and his support for a better understanding of public affairs.
- Its initiatives include support for creation of the School of International and Public Affairs, SIPA, at Florida International University. So, we find ourselves celebrating SIPA, too, as it begins a long-running effort to coordinate activities at FIU in pursuit of that same understanding of public life in the United States.
- And we find ourselves in the midst of celebrating, or puzzling over, or enduring—to each his own on this one—our quadrennial collective effort to select nominees for President of, and then an actual President for, these same United States.

You are surrounded by people—partisans, pundits, *roommates*—who will tell you exactly how that will come out. I promise not to try to out-shout them, though I shall correct some of their worst misunderstandings along the way. What I shall try to do instead is drop our time—the current moment—into the *three* worlds of postwar American politics, and try to make the first two worlds comment on this world, our world, the third distinct *structural era* since the end of the Second World War.

There have indeed been three distinct political orders in the United States since World War II, distinguished by three diagnostic partisan outcomes. I intend to go in search of key differences in the underpinnings—the recurrent influences—for these. In pursuit of the same goal, political scientists have ultimately been driven to create three different ways of understanding American politics, each ostensibly appropriate to the dominant influences of its time. I cannot avoid talking about these scholarly efforts, too.

Yet the cost of proceeding in this way has been an ironic lack of continuity in the way that *political change itself* is understood. So what I really want to attempt, ever so briefly, is to address these three different orders—almost different ‘worlds’—with the same basic toolkit, in the hope that we can cumulate rather than fragment our understanding of the larger contours of American politics.

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The end of the Second World War itself seemed, in its own time, like a major potential turning-point in American politics. There were huge surface disruptions associated with economic and social reconversion, and these did inevitably spill over into politics. If you go back and read the professional commentators or indeed the social scientists of that time, you will encounter nearly any prediction you can imagine. Yet in our time, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that while American politics might never again look precisely like itself in the depths of the Great Depression or in the depths of World War II, what was effectively the Late New Deal Era had grown out of both and was destined to last for another full generation, before coming apart, not in the 1940s, but in the 1960s.

The central *policy* conflicts of this Late New Deal Era were obvious and inescapable. The dominant conflict continued to involve *social welfare*. The New Deal had brought the welfare state to the United States, and conflict over its provisions would continue to characterize the Late New Deal Era. The dominant secondary conflict involved *foreign affairs*, as the end of World War II was followed, not by a return to international disengagement, but by construction of the institutions (and disputes) of the Cold War. If conflicts over these never supplanted social welfare, they could temporarily displace it at any given time.

The Late New Deal Era had diagnostic *social divisions* to go with these dominant policy conflicts. A politics of social welfare both elicited and was driven by electoral coalitions built around *social class*. Blue-collar Americans leaned Democratic, white-collar Americans leaned Republican. These coalitions were fueled and reinforced by political intermediaries diagnostic of their era, its key *organized interests*. From one side, union labor increasingly buttressed the Democratic coalition. From the other and despite the rise of corporate business in the postwar economic boom, it was really *small* business, not big, that buttressed the Republican coalition.

These social coalitions were then connected up to those policy conflicts by two *political parties* that featured important echoes of an older form of party organization, coupled with strong hints of a newer, emerging form. The Democrats retained more of the old, being an amalgam of organized machines in the cities, courthouse rings in the countryside, and growing volunteer organizations everywhere. The Republicans, having been devastated by the Great Depression, were already closer to the new form, as an

ideological, activist-based operation, though the increasingly skeletal structure of the party still left substantial power in the hands of party officialdom.

The structure of government itself was not as central to the politics that resulted as it would be in the successor era to the Late New Deal. What that structure did imply was substantially different coalitions contesting for the Presidency as opposed to Congress. For one party, this difference produced an internal tension involving Northern Democrats with the Presidency but Southern Democrats with Congress. For the other party, the difference instead pitted Republican Party *office-holders* against Republican Party *activists*, where the former saw the need to make peace with the New Deal while the latter preferred to confront it.

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Yet if this was not to be the dawn of a new order in American *politics*, it was to be the dawn of a new era—a self-conscious ‘behavioral revolution’—in the *study* of that politics. Survey research, with its inherently empirical focus, was coming into its own from the 1940s onward in American society. At the same time, the natural sciences—the ‘hard sciences’—appeared to be making great strides in their ability to control the physical world. Social scientists aspired to be part of this scientific revolution, and they found in survey research an apparent means for doing so.

Thus political scientists came to believe, really for the first time, that they had the empirical evidence to explain the structure of the Late New Deal Era. Though not being gifted with hindsight, they actually thought they were explaining, not the nature of this first world of postwar politics, but the nature of American politics for all time.

Only partial predecessors of what would become the American National Election Study were in the field for the presidential election of 1948. But already by 1952, a full-blown national survey that would be a lineal predecessor of the ANES was in fact in the field. Headquartered at the University of Michigan and led by Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, it reported its first comprehensive results in a landmark study, *The American Voter*, where these authors championed one central concept that would anchor their explanation of this first postwar world.

That concept was *party identification*, and it could be assessed through a simple branching question. “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” For those who chose Republican or Democrat, this was followed by “Would you call yourself a strong or a not very strong [Republican or Democrat]?” For those who chose Independent, it was followed instead by “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or the Democratic Party?” Figure 1 shows the diagnostic political behavior that resulted:

- Strong identifiers [the left-hand bar] rarely deserted their chosen party.
- Weak identifiers [the bar to their right] deserted somewhat more.
- Independent identifiers [the bar to *their* right] somewhat more yet.
- And true independents [the right-hand bar] were truly blown around.

Figure 1

The American Voter thus limned a political world in which partisan identifications, largely built upon *class coalitions* originally formed around *social-welfare issues*, were the dominant organizing factor in American politics. They were

“the unmoved mover”; they were passed from parent to child; and they imparted a characteristic dynamic to this politics:

- From one side, a clear majority of Americans still *supported* the policy core of the New Deal and identified with the Democratic Party, such that unified partisan control of the institutions of American national government in *Democratic* hands was the natural result.
- From the other side, when *foreign affairs* was the dominant policy conflict, as it actually was with the first election of the ANES, the Korean War election of 1952, and when the Republicans had a personally attractive candidate for President, as they did with Dwight Eisenhower in that same year, they could hope not only to wrest away the Presidency. They could also expect to sweep Congress along in its wake.

If this politics of unified partisan control was nevertheless a moderate and centripetal politics, not a polarized and centrifugal one, it was because the central dynamic of mass politics, via party identification, occurred within those other key characteristics of the Late New Deal world. Liberal Democrats were pulled toward the center by the nature of the Democratic Party in *Congress*, where Southern Democrats were essential to legislative success. Conservative Republicans were pulled toward the center by the nature of their *presidential* challenge, where a national candidate who could not draw substantial Democratic support—and *Northern* Democratic support at that—would never be elected president in the first place.

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And then it all came apart. The American political order shifted; the central device for assessing it scientifically stopped working. Given their electoral successes in

the old order, it should probably come as no surprise that partisan Democrats attempted to deny this first great postwar *change* for a very long time. Because the leading device for understanding that order, party identification, had arrived in time to *colonize* the study of American politics under the old order, political scientists, too, were loath to surrender its—and their—intellectual power.

Yet party identification was not, and could not be, a device for explaining why Democrats would vote Republican and Republicans vote Democratic. Just as it certainly was not, and again could not be, a device for explaining why partisan identifiers would create ‘divided government’, *split partisan control* of the institutions of American national government. But that was exactly what happened in 1968, and it was to remain *the diagnostic description* of American national politics—or rather, of its second postwar world—for a very long time. Recurrent split partisan control was to give this new world its name, the Era of Divided Government. Though as with its predecessor, it was other characteristics that actually gave the new era its *structure*, within which split partisan control became the logical result.

The central *policy* conflicts of the new era were again increasingly and then insistently clear. Old conflicts over social welfare did not go away; if anything, they became more intense. Yet they were joined by new conflicts over cultural values and social life, often on an equal and sometimes on a superior footing. The leading policy conflicts of the old order had been essentially *distributional*, involving the proper share of divisible goods allocated to various sectors of society. The leading policy conflicts of the new order were essentially *behavioral*, involving the proper norms within which social life should proceed.

These latter appeared first, in 1968, as conflicts over the riotous degradation of the civil rights revolution, over extensive student protests against the Vietnam War, and over the appearance of a self-conscious ‘counter-culture’ more generally. The old standbys, social welfare and foreign affairs, were not displaced, though the latter did change: the Cold War consensus broke down, pushing the parties farther apart even there. Yet this widening split was joined by fresh divisions on what should rightfully be called cultural issues: criminal justice, abortion, public order, religion, public deportment, patriotism, educational policy, family values, and on and on.

In a kind of chicken-and-egg relationship, there was an expansive body of new *organized interests* to go with these new policy divisions, intermediary organizations whose central concerns were essentially cultural rather than economic. For the Democrats, these included environmentalists, peace groups, feminists, and homosexuals. For the Republicans, they included anti-abortionists, gun owners, religious fundamentalists, and supporters of the traditional family.

Yet in this second postwar world, these organized groups were connected up to policy conflicts by political parties which had themselves changed in their fundamental structure. Now, *both* parties were essentially networks of issue-driven activists, not long-serving incumbents of the formal machinery. Moreover, just to close the circle, these party activists were now disproportionately generated by the newer cultural organizations that increasingly populated the political landscape.

As a result, the social coalitions at the base of politics acquired a new complexity, the product of an *interaction* between newly consequential issue activists and the social backgrounds of their partisan rank-and-files. Now, there was not just heightened *inter-*

party conflict, between what had become *polarizing* liberals and *polarizing* conservatives among those who did the work of the political parties. Now, there was additional *intra*-party conflict, an elite-mass conflict as well, between party activists and their own putative rank and file:

- *Democratic activists* were consistently liberal. They remained liberal on social welfare—that did not change—and they added a strident liberalism on cultural values.
- *Democratic mass identifiers*, on the other hand, retained a huge body of supporters who remained liberal on social welfare but had *never* been liberal on cultural values. And they were not about to become so.
- *Republican activists* were likewise consistently conservative. They remained conservative on social welfare, perhaps becoming even more so, and they added a stiff conservatism on cultural values.
- *Republican mass identifiers*, however, retained a huge body of supporters who remained conservative on social welfare but had *never* been conservative on cultural values. And they too did not become so.

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So, there were *cross-cutting majorities* on economic versus cultural issues at the social base for American politics. And they were cross-cutting largely because the intermediary organizations for that politics, its political parties and their associated interest groups, put policy programs together in fashions very different from the preferences of large segments of the general public. Yet the structure of American government facilitated a simple solution in the face of this increased complexity: *colonize*

one branch of elective national government with one majority, and one branch with the other.

Because this inevitably meant one branch for the Republicans and one branch for the Democrats, there was more or less automatically a *name* for the new politics as well. Split partisan control was its diagnostic characteristic. ‘Divided government’ was its monicker. And the *Era of Divided Government* had been born.

For a time, political scientists tried to make party identification explain this new era too, and not just its predecessor. Figure 2 shows that actual Democratic majority in the old order. Political scientists pointed to the rising share of those who refused to call themselves Republicans or Democrats but insisted that they were partisan Independents as the alleged root of the new order, and Figure 2 does confirm that there was an increase in the share of these individuals within the American electorate. This had to mean that the era of reliable unified *Democratic* control of American national government was not as secure as it had been since the end of the Second World War.

Figure 2

Yet Figure 2 is not sufficient—not nearly—to produce a new era in American politics. Indeed, the basic idea of party identification was a failure if it was ‘office-specific’. Party identification as a motive force was simply gone if you could consider yourself a Republican for the Presidency, a Democrat for Congress, and, say, a Green for Governor. Instead, what scholars had to find—we see this by hindsight, though it took those on the ground much longer to see it—was some basis, presumably some *issue-linked* basis, which would cause people to assert a party identification but then deviate regularly from it in their votes for public office.

What became the solution—the central political science for this second world of postwar American politics—was known as the ‘issue evolution perspective’. First articulated by Edward Carmines and James Stimson in a book of the same name, *Issue Evolution*, this was a focus on new issues that arrived in a form sufficiently powerful to themselves become institutionalized, like the old issues of social welfare but at ‘right angles’ to them, creating institutionalized and ongoing *cross-pressures* on their voters.

Figure 3

This was indeed what happened, as Figure 3 attests. The lines on the figure are the *difference* in issue impacts on the vote for President versus Congress:

- As you can see, policy issues did not do much to pull the two offices apart during the Late New Deal Era. Nothing much was distinguishing the presidential from the congressional vote, which further helped to explain why they moved together in presidential election years.
- By the late 1960s, however, *cultural* issues, involving the proper role of government in supporting behavioral norms, had begun to pull voters substantially more Republican for the presidency than for Congress. [This is the *green* line in Figure 3.]
- By the late 1970s, issues of national security, where the parties now staked out sharply different approaches, were pulling voters even more Republican for the presidency than for Congress. [This is the *red* line in the figure.]
- From the late 1960s through the late 1980s, then, there were in fact major issue concerns pulling voters away from their welfare-based party identifications *with one*

institution but not the other. Issue evolution had provided the basis for split partisan control of the major elective institutions of American national government.

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And then it all came apart. Once again, the American political order shifted. Once again, the central device for assessing it scientifically stopped working. I am almost sorry to pull this rug for a second time. But at the peak of its explanatory power, the issue-evolution perspective stopped performing as it had for the previous twenty years. And it did so, of course, because the Era of Divided Government had expired.

Issues, even cross-cutting issues, hardly disappeared from American politics. Rather, the *problem* was the opposite: they actually looked essentially as they had for the *previous* twenty years. Yet from 1992 onward, they no longer functioned as a single, simple explanation of the result. Something—something major—was different, with obviously different outcomes and a different set of ongoing influences to elicit them.

The Era of Divided Government had been incipiently in place by 1968, producing a regular pattern of Republican Presidencies stapled onto Democratic Congresses, with only the one-term Carter accident as an exception. By hindsight, we can now see that 1992 was different. First, Bill Clinton brought back unified partisan control of American national government. Then, only two years later, he was integral to bringing back *Republican* control of the House of Representatives for the first time since early in the *Late New Deal* era.

With the single exception of the Clinton re-election of 1996, unified partisan control was to be the new story of on-year elections: unified control for the Democrats in

1992, unified control for the *Republicans* in 2000, unified control for the Republicans again in 2004, unified control for the *Democrats* in 2008.

Active partisans once more denied the obvious. Active Democrats tried to see the George W. Bush elections—both of them—as a blip. Active Republicans wanted to see the Barack Obama election as yet another one-term accident. Political scientists split into two camps as well, one denying that there was any overall change and the other asserting that the old tools could explain it. Though like the activists, both sides were unified in being in denial.

Yet just to make this transition odder, these political scientists *already possessed* what would become their central means for interpreting a *new* political era. It was just that they had not yet connected it up to the new political world. Nevertheless, there it was, in the form of a burgeoning and multifaceted focus on *partisan polarization*. As ever, different authors preferred different vocabularies. Yet what most were talking about was a two-pronged development, whereby active partisans became more ideologically homogeneous within *both* of the two major parties, while at the same time those parties moved farther and farther *away from each other*.

Figure 4

What was additionally different was that the focus of analytic concern in this third world of postwar American politics was no longer principally the presidency, but principally Congress. The issue *differences* that had once distinguished the presidency from Congress in the eyes of the American voter had largely been extinguished, and this was much more a matter of change in Congress than of change in the presidency. Now, as Figure 4 attests, the same concerns moving voters in a major way with the presidency,

namely social welfare and cultural values, [The blue and the *green* lines] were moving voters with Congress, too.

And they were indeed moving the two parties in opposite directions. Once, these parties in both houses of Congress were characterized by ideologically moderate, even ideologically dissident, minority factions. Now, the liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats were effectively extinct, while moderate Republicans and moderate Democrats appeared as endangered species.

Perhaps surprisingly, there was general scholarly agreement about the sources of this contemporary polarization, in the form of two major changes to the ongoing structure of American politics. The first was the disappearance of the ‘solid South’, that anchor of what could have been described in the Late New Deal Era as the American ‘three-party system’: National Republicans, Northern Democrats, and, diagnostically, Southern Democrats.

For our purposes, the point about *any* dominant one-party system is that it has to contain all shades of ideological opinion within it. When a region as large as the American South then aligns with the two-party system common to the rest of the nation, the nation as a whole inevitably becomes more ideologically polarized.

Yet while this regional change in the fundamental nature of American politics was under way, a second, fully national change was under way as well. This was a shift in the nature of *both* political parties, from *formal machinery* built around organizational service, to *social networks* built around issue activism, where internal party fortunes were largely determined by an ability to capture the policy concerns dominant within the activist stratum.

This second change had been under way, beneath the surface, during all of the Era of Divided Government. By 1992, it had fully captured the activist strata in both parties. Active Democrats from around the nation no longer differed much from each other, and the same could be said of active Republicans. By 1992, these altered activist strata had more or less fully captured their partisan representatives in Congress as well, those sitting Republican and Democratic senators and representatives.

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There were still scholars who clung onto *party identification* as the key to interpreting this third world of postwar American politics, despite the fact that what this key would have done, had it been determinative, was to restore *the Late New Deal Era*. There were still scholars who clung onto *issue evolution* with its cross-cutting concerns as the key to interpreting American politics, despite the fact that what this key would have done, had *it* been determinative—if it could still be used as a simple overlay atop party identification—was to *sustain* the Era of Divided Government.

What I want to suggest is that it is time to step back, stop replacing one allegedly central explanation of the current world with another, and try putting them all together in a way that could have been used at every point across the postwar period. Though to do this, we do need to take one further analytic step. Contemporary students of partisan polarization largely agreed—albeit some happily and others not—on what they saw as its main implications for the modern era: the clustering of each party around a narrower and narrower ideological core, and the movement of those two cores away from each other. The handful of graphics that I am about to show you are in full conformity with this view.

Yet while those engaged in the polarization argument stop there, you and I must go on and notice a second major effect of these changes, an effect that, when added to party identification, the central tool for explaining the first world of postwar American politics, and when added to issue evolution, the central tool for explaining the second world, just may—in combination—allow us to see the contours of the third world, our world, the modern era in American politics. Let us, then, take three simple examples of partisan polarization: first between the sexes, then between social classes, and then between moral foundations.

Figure 5

Figure 5.A tells the story of men, women, and presidential voting since 1952. In the old world, the Late New Deal Era, men were more Democratic and women more Republican. This partisan difference disappeared in the 1960s. And in the 1970s, men and women began to separate in the opposite fashion, men more Republican and *women* more Democratic. The result was destined to become a huge gap; the *size* of that gap is a standard story of polarization.

But note an equally important, second effect: partisan polarization was almost entirely a product of the behavior of *men*. Women voted no more Democratic; it was just that men voted much more Republican. Polarization was thus not an equal opportunity employer. It was a one-way benefit to Republicans, at least when seen through the lens of sex.

Figure 5.B tells the story of family income instead, by income terciles, that is, top, middle, and bottom thirds. The figure suppresses the middle third in order to hammer its point: I assure you that the middle falls neatly between the top and the bottom. In the old

world, the Late New Deal Era, the rich were more Republican and the poor more Democratic, but not by all that much: this was an era, after all, when *most people* were Democrats. This income gap, like the sex gap, broadened out in the 1970s, and this, too, is conventionally treated as the full polarization story.

But again, note that what really happened was that the Democrats remained essentially flat in the bottom third by income, while the Republicans gained about ten percentage points in the top third. Polarization is not an equal opportunity employer. It is a more limited but still clear benefit to Republicans when seen through the lens of family income.

Figure 5.C, finally, adds the story of generic religiosity, the *intensity* of religious practice. Again, a small middle category is dropped to heighten the comparison between regular church attenders and regular non-attenders, who together do make up more than 85% of the sample. This time and opposite to the income story, there was little to say *through the 1980s*: religiosity had nearly nothing to do with partisan voting. And then its influence exploded.

On the one hand, there was a Democratic gain among the irreligious this time, to go with a Republican gain among the religious, and while there are more of the latter than the former, the irreligious are actually growing faster. On the other hand, the Republican gain from even this aspect of partisan polarization was still much larger, and this larger gain was happening among what remains the larger *population*.

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What does it all add up to? What should we say about the political order of the modern era, our era? What *is* the structural nature of American politics in our time? Not

all the dots are visible, in my view. But if we connect up those that we can see, the resulting picture suggests this:

- The balance between the two parties within the general public is *closer* than in the Late New Deal Era or the Era of Divided Government. A Democratic edge remains, but it can be compromised not just by cross-cutting issues but even by voter turnout.
- The active political parties are just as clearly *farther apart* than in either the Late New Deal Era or the Era of Divided Government. It would have been theoretically possible for the two to move closer together as they became more closely balanced. But this is not what happened.
- The share of those who *reject* a partisan connection is no longer rising, but in an era of greater party balance and partisan polarization, their voting *influence* continues to increase. It takes fewer switchers to move partisan control of national government in a major way.
- The resulting *over-responsiveness* by the party system to limited shifts in voter preference (or even in voter turnout) simultaneously creates a greater potential for public *disappointment* with the most recent partisan change, whatever it was, Republican or Democratic.
- Moreover, there remain major policy realms that *cross-cut* the old social-welfare basis of the party system, without having managed to *replace* it. Cross-cutting issues are thus a continuing incentive to *generate* those limited voting shifts that have an augmented impact on partisan control of government.

Let me say the same thing differently. We had unified partisan control of American national government in Republican hands in 2004. We had split partisan

control with a Republican President and a Democratic Congress in 2006. We had unified partisan control of American national government in *Democratic* hands in 2008. And we had split partisan control with a *Democratic* President and a *Republican* Congress in 2010. The last time something analogous to this happened was in the 1840s. Get used to it.

Figure 1

Strength of Party Identification and Partisan Regularity in Voting for President, 1956

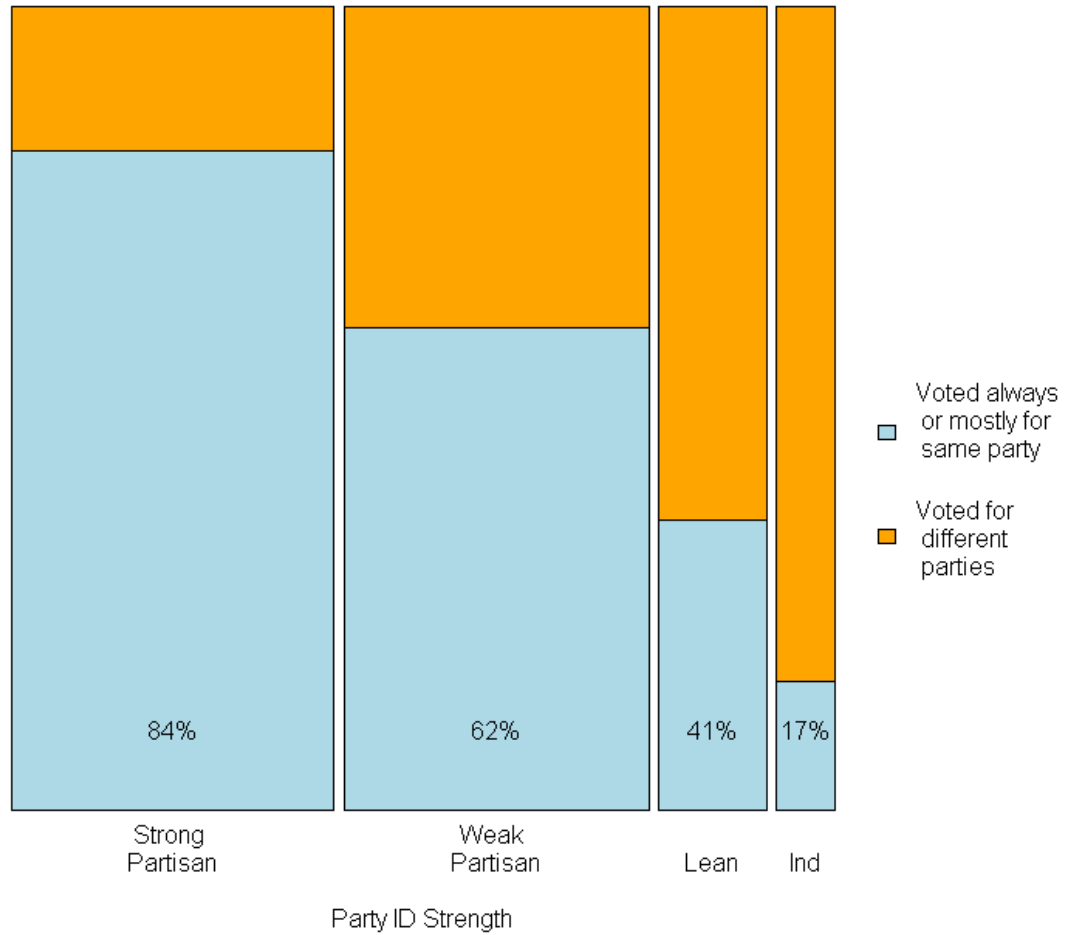


Figure 2

Party Identification across the Postwar Years

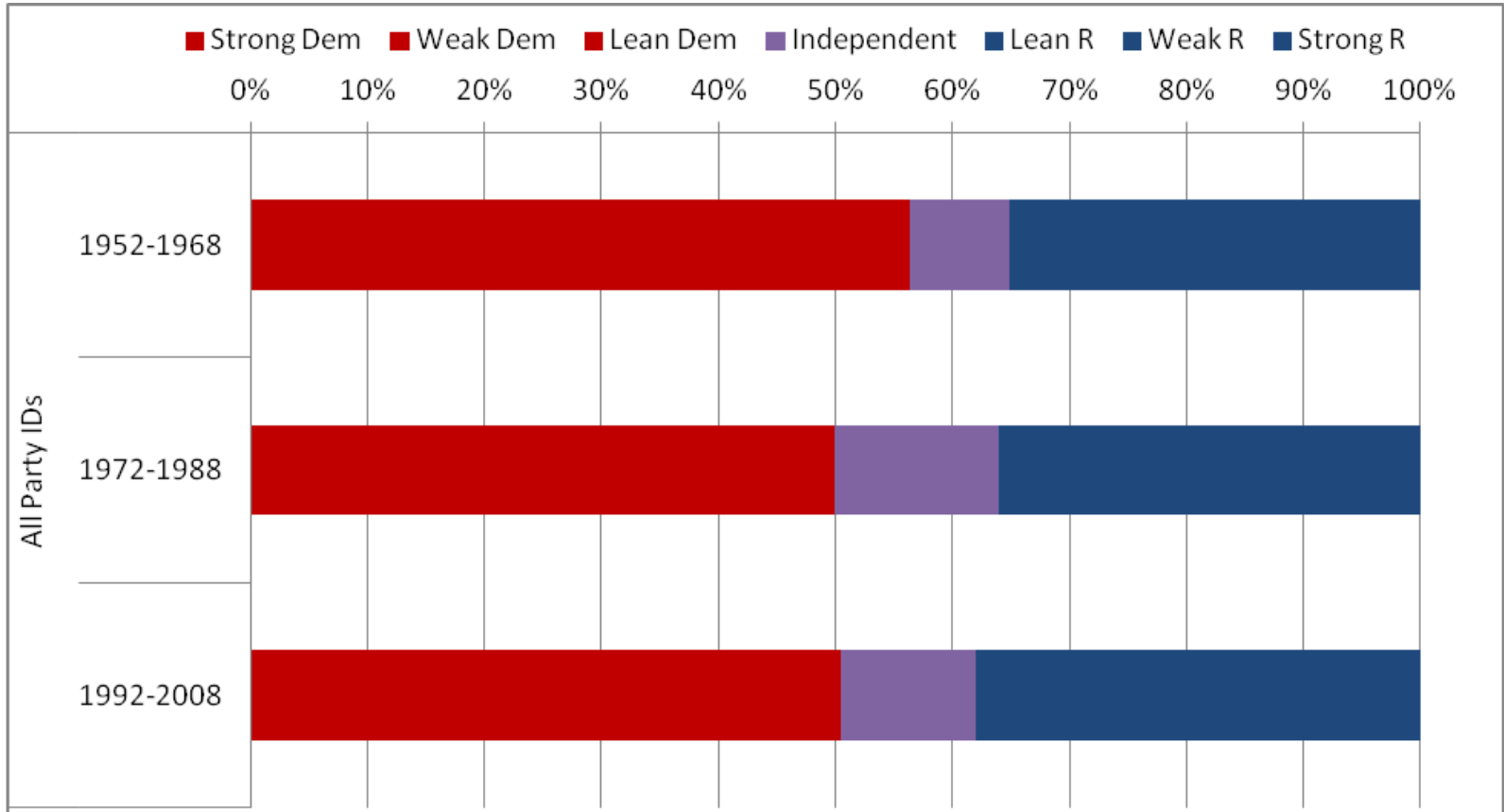


Figure 3

Policy Preferences and Voting Impact, President vs. Congress

(Effect of Conservative Issue Stance on Republican Presidential Choice less Effect on Republican Congressional Choice)

All : Policy Area Chart

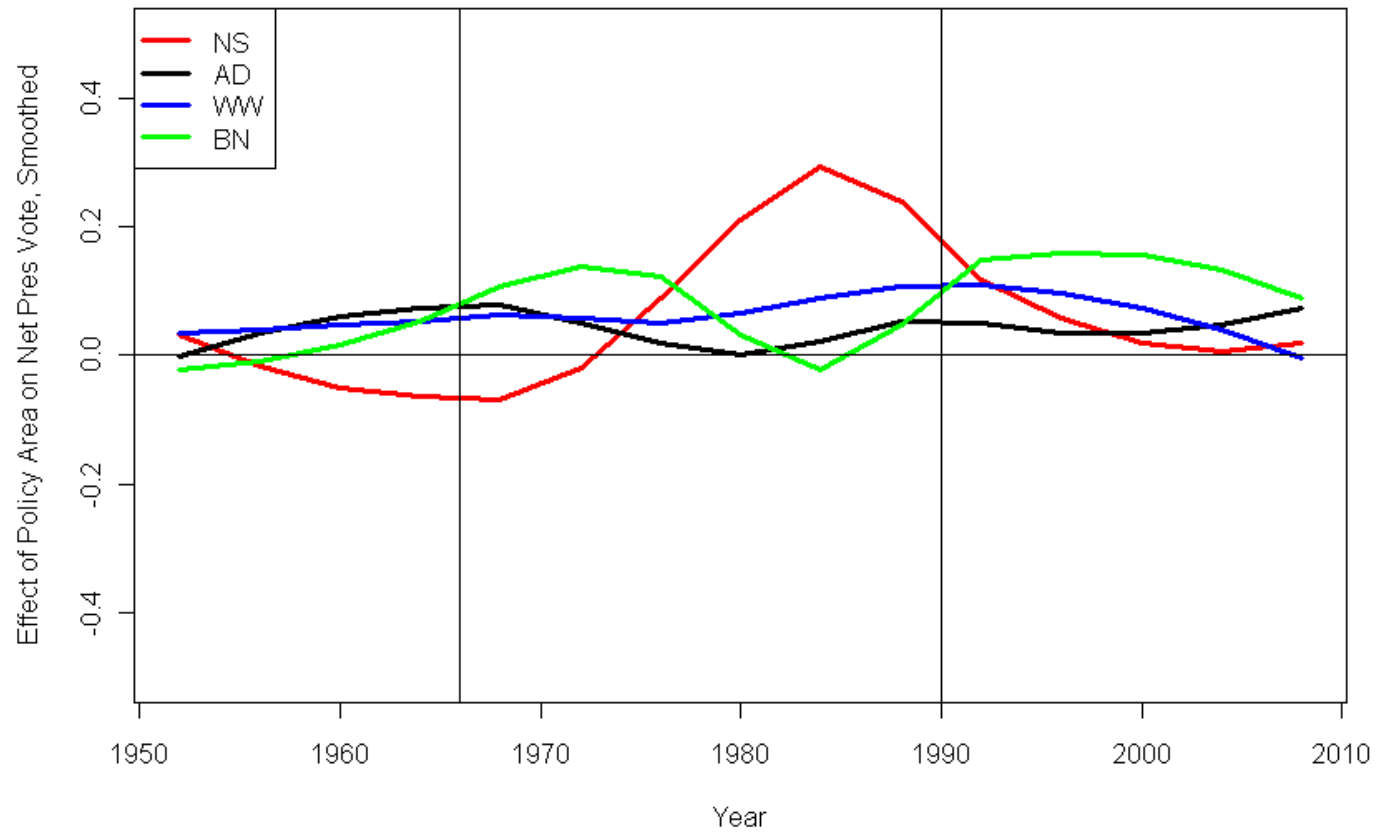


Figure 4

Policy Issues and Congressional Vote
(Effect of Conservative Issue Stance on Republican Congressional Choice)

All Respondents : Policy Area Chart

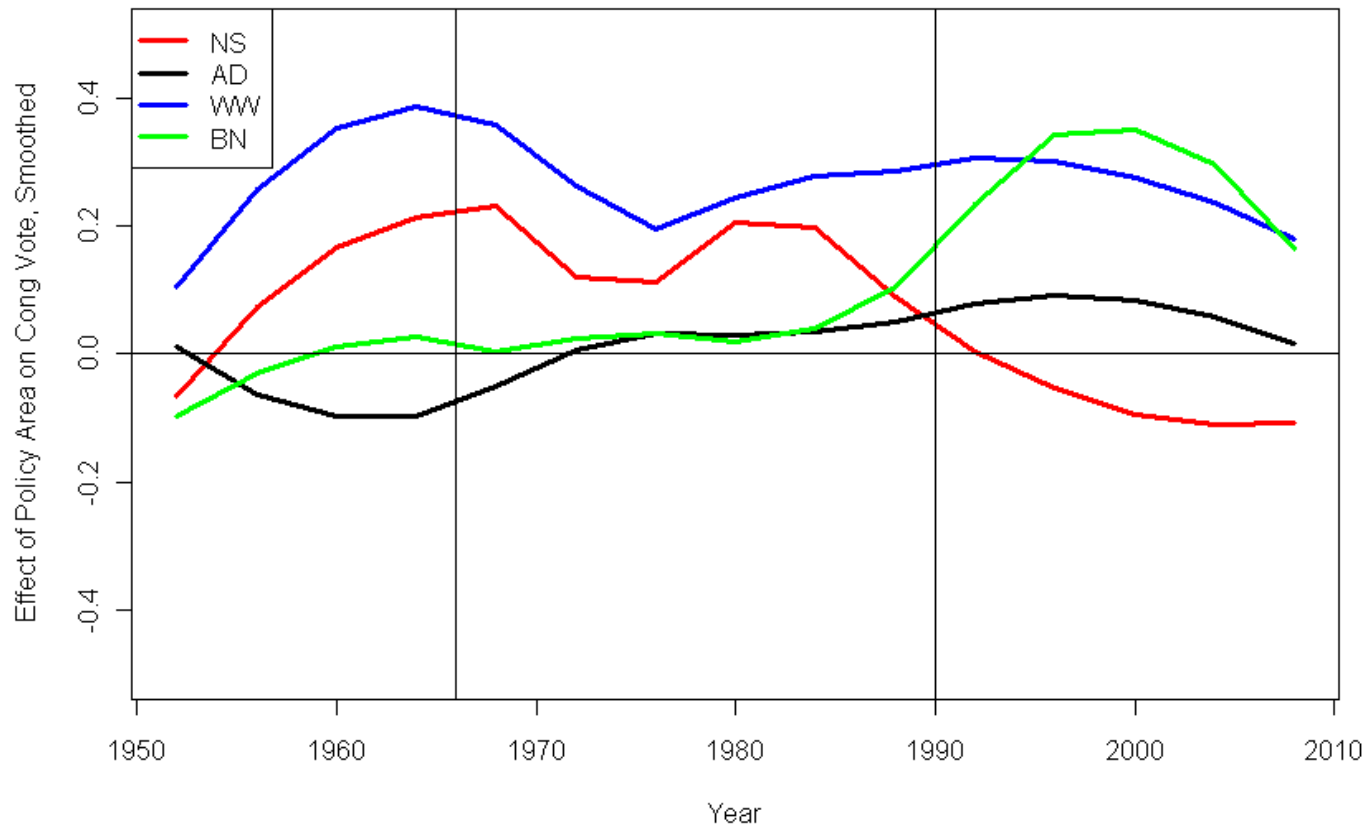


Figure 5.A
Partisan Polarization by Sex

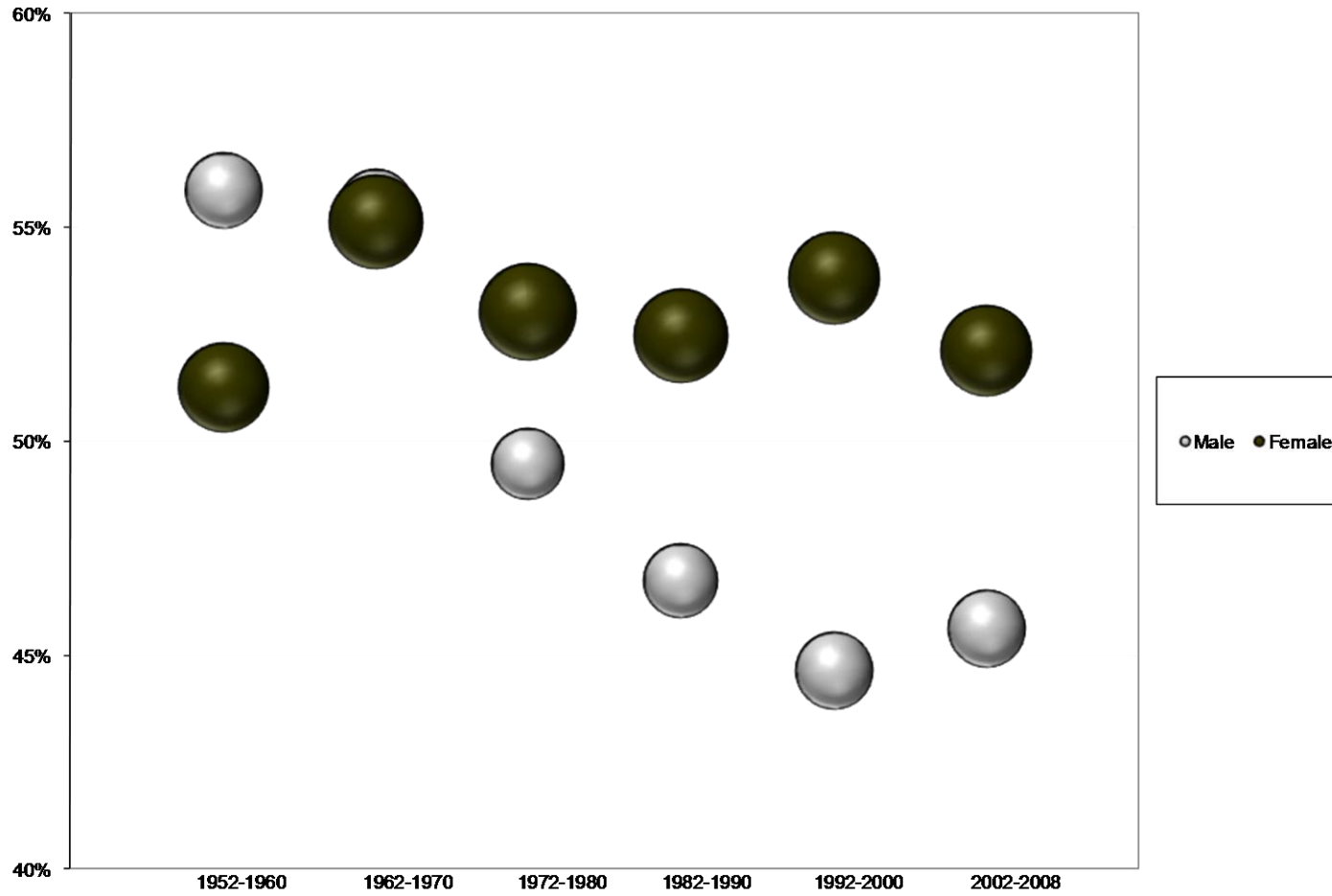


Figure 5.B

Partisan Polarization by Income

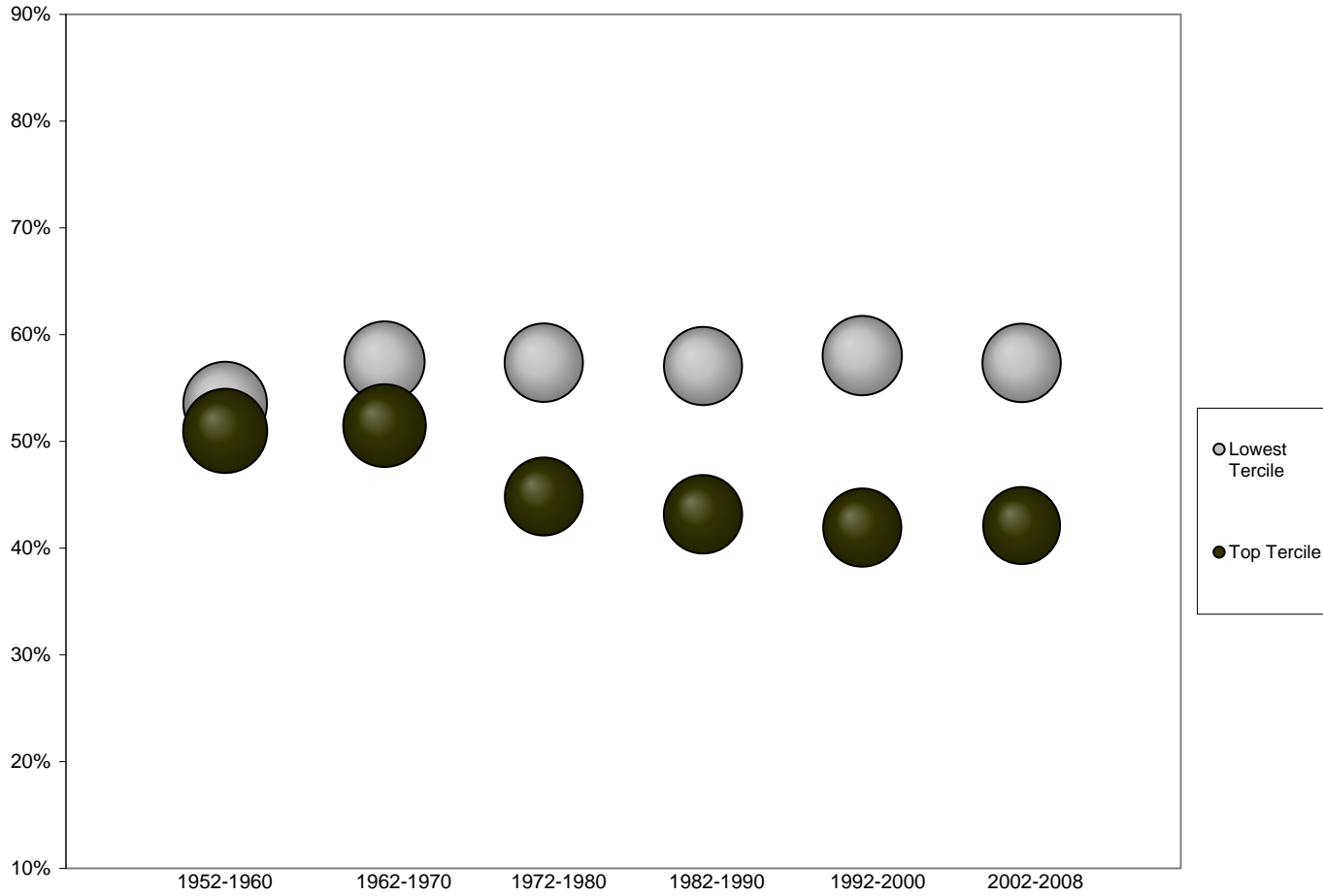


Figure 5.C

Partisan Polarization by Religiosity

