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Disconnected: The Political Class versus the People

Morris P. Fiorina

Matthew S. Levendusky

During the last decade of the twentieth century, the belief that American political life had become highly polarized attained the status of conventional wisdom. At the 1992 Republican National Convention, candidate Pat Buchanan declared the outbreak of a culture war, “a war for the soul of America.” And in the midterm elections of 1994, the story line held that “angry white males”—upset with gays, gun control, immigration, affirmative action, and Hillary Clinton—put an end to more than forty years of Democratic Party dominance of the House of Representatives. Although the angry talk subsided a little in the following years, the firestorm erupted again in 1998 with the Monica Lewinsky scandal and the subsequent impeachment of President Bill Clinton.

So far, the 2000s have brought no respite. The decade began with the contested presidential vote in the state of Florida and the razor-thin victory of Republican candidate George W. Bush, sealed by the decisions of a Republican secretary of state and a conservative-controlled Supreme Court. The episode left many Democrats bitter, unwilling even to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Bush presidency. Following an interlude of muted partisanship after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush reversed his campaign pledge and chose to govern as a divider not a uniter, implementing political adviser Karl Rove’s strategy of winning reelection by maximizing support among core Republican groups.

More recently, the president and vice president have argued vigorously for exceptional interpretations of executive power, while their Democratic adversaries in Congress strongly contest such interpretations.

Thus, at some levels the contention that political life has become more polarized is not in dispute. Nor is Pat Buchanan alone among public intellectuals in seeing an ongoing cultural conflict in America.¹ Other conservatives have characterized the conflict in similarly bellicose terms:

The competition is not a battle of interests but, as in late antiquity, a battle of worldviews. . . . What is at stake is not simply how much wealth is to be redistributed . . . but all of the values and beliefs of a culture. With the answers to such basic questions as “what is just?” “what is good?” and “what is evil?” now a matter of debate, the term “culture wars” has appropriately been used to describe the scene in contemporary American politics. And just as pagan Rome died and gave way to the new culture of Augustinian Christianity, so is Tocqueville’s America dying and giving way to the new culture of expressive individualism.²

There is no “after the Cold War” for me. So far from having ended, my cold war has increased in intensity, as sector after sector of American life has been ruthlessly corrupted by the liberal ethos. It is an ethos that aims simultaneously at political and social collectivism on the one hand, and moral anarchy on the other.³

Of course, intellectuals are by definition a small and unrepresentative slice of American life, so few would take such pronouncements as an accurate reflection of what is happening in the country at large. More convincing evidence of polarization comes from studies of the political class—public officials, party and interest group leaders, activists, financial contributors, and members of the political infotainment community. This evidence documents a dramatic rise in congressional polarization since the mid-twentieth century, as well as the existence of significant differences in the political views held by the various segments of the political class.⁴

1. Sociologist James Davison Hunter is generally credited with inspiring Buchanan’s call to arms. See Hunter (1991).

2. Dworkin (1996, p. xi).

3. Kristol (1995, p. 486).

4. For references to this literature, see the citations in the essay by David W. Brady and Hahrie C. Han in chapter 3 of this volume.

Yet there remains a critical missing piece in the prevailing portrait of a polarized American political order—the American people. Until very recently, polarization of the electorate was assumed to be one of the most important factors in explaining the polarization of the political class. As Bush reelection strategist Matthew Dowd stated in 2003, the president had not tried to expand his electoral base because “you’ve got 80 percent to 90 percent of the country that look at each other like they are on separate planets.”⁵ Why should a candidate bother trying to appeal to the middle if there are no voters left there? Thus the campaign strategy of “mobilizing the base” would seem to have supplanted the traditional strategy of “moving to the center” with good reason: in today’s political climate there are no more “swing voters” that a move to the center might appeal to.

The only problem, however, is that recent academic research contradicts the belief that there is no longer a middle ground in American politics. In the late 1990s, both qualitative and quantitative studies found little evidence that Americans were highly polarized, or that they were becoming more so.⁶ On the contrary, Princeton University sociologist Paul DiMaggio, with coauthors John H. Evans and Bethany Bryson, conducted an exhaustive analysis of General Social Survey and National Election Studies data from the years 1972 to 1994 and found that the political views of Americans had become more *similar*, not more different. (This conclusion also held when the study was updated through 2000 by Evans.)⁷ A study by University of Michigan sociologist Wayne Baker, who examined twenty years of World Values Survey data, found not only little evidence of a culture war in the United States, but also that most Americans held a mix of the traditional and modern views that were supposedly at war.⁸ More recently, Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope found that attitudinal differences between residents of the so-called red and blue states were greatly exaggerated in 2000—a conclusion that was reaffirmed when the analysis was updated through 2004.⁹

In other words, while systematic evidence indicates that American politics as conducted by the political class is increasingly polarized, the evidence also suggests that this development is not simply a reflection of an increasingly polarized electorate. The result is a disconnect between the American people and those

5. Quoted in Ron Brownstein, “Bush Falls to Pre-9/11 Approval Rating,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2003.

6. The most notable qualitative study is by Wolfe (1998). The most notable quantitative study is by DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996).

7. DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996); Evans (2003).

8. Baker (2005a).

9. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006).

who purport to represent them—a disconnect that political scientist Keith T. Poole has called “the central puzzle of modern American politics.”¹⁰ Contrary to a half-century of theory and research on the centrist tendencies of two-party politics, American politics today finds a polarized political class competing for the support of a much less polarized electorate.¹¹

So why, then, has the idea of a polarized electorate attained the status of conventional wisdom? As it turns out, the exaggerated picture of popular polarization is easier to explain than the disconnect between representatives and the represented. Many in the journalistic community forgot, never learned, or have chosen to ignore a half-century of research contrasting the mass public and political elites.¹² The result has been that the media have lost sight of critical differences between the two groups. People who are active in politics know a lot and care a lot about politics and public policy, and their views are organized according to ideological frameworks. In contrast, most ordinary voters have less knowledge about politics, care less about it, and are largely nonideological. Moreover, people who are active in politics tend to have more extreme views than ordinary voters. Yet because political elites constitute the public face of politics, the media naturally portray this unrepresentative slice of America as the norm rather than the exception—a tendency that is undoubtedly exacerbated by the media’s preference for stories that stress conflict over agreement.

Nevertheless, it does a journalist no great harm to believe that the country is polarized when it is not. But candidates running for office—as well as the people who work for and bankroll them—have a great personal interest in getting things right. They run too great a risk of wasting their investments by operating on the basis of false information—such as the idea that “80 to 90 percent of the country look at each other like they are on separate planets.” So what, then, would prompt members of the political class to act on the erroneous presumption that the mass public is as polarized as the political class?

Party Sorting vs. Polarization

We do not think there is a simple answer to this question, so we will focus instead on a development that many believe is a major factor in a more complicated answer.¹³ Commentators and pundits look at the electorate today and see

10. Remarks by Keith T. Poole at the History of Congress Conference, Stanford University, Spring 2004.

11. See Downs (1957).

12. See McCloskey, Hoffman, and O’Hara (1960); Converse (1964).

13. See, for example, Jacobson (forthcoming 2007).

Table 2-1. *Party Sorting without Increasing Aggregate Polarization in a Hypothetical Electorate*

<i>Ideology</i>	<i>Period 1</i>	<i>Period 2</i>
Liberals	60 Democrats, 40 Republicans	90 Democrats, 10 Republicans
Moderates	100 Independents	100 Independents
Conservatives	40 Democrats, 60 Republicans	10 Democrats, 90 Republicans

Source: Compiled by the authors.

two ideologically distinct camps, and they label that polarization. But polarization implies that the political opinions and attitudes of the public—in the aggregate—have been pushed away from moderate, centrist positions to the liberal or conservative extreme. When the electorate is highly polarized, the middle ground literally vanishes—but that is not the case today.

Instead, over the past generation, party sorting—the process by which a tighter fit is brought about between political ideology and party affiliation—has occurred in American politics. As recently as the 1970s, liberals and conservatives could each find a comfortable home in either the Democratic or the Republican Party. But nowadays the Republican Party is much more likely to be the home of ideologically conservative voters, while the Democratic Party is home to most liberals. The relative numbers of conservatives and liberals may not have changed all that much, but their party affiliation certainly has.¹⁴

The distinction between party sorting and polarization is fairly easy to see with an example. Consider the hypothetical electorate depicted in table 2-1. At any point in time, the electorate consists of 100 liberals, whose party affiliation can be either Democratic or Republican; 100 moderates, who are political independents; and 100 conservatives, whose party affiliation, like the liberals', can be either Republican or Democratic. In Period 1, liberals are slightly more likely to be Democrats and conservatives are slightly more likely to be Republicans, but both parties contain significant numbers of liberals and conservatives. Knowing a voter's party affiliation in Period 1, then, provides relatively little information about her political ideology.

Between Period 1 and Period 2, the parties sort themselves along ideological lines. The great preponderance of liberals are now affiliated with the Democratic

14. While scholarly awareness of party sorting has been evident for some years, and a number of excellent focused studies have appeared, there has been relatively little work tracing the issues that are most closely associated with sorting, the groups in which sorting has most clearly occurred, and other specific features of the sorting process. For a review of the evidence for party sorting on abortion, see Adams (1997). For sorting on women's issues, see Sanbonmatsu (2002).

Party, and a similarly large proportion of conservatives are now Republicans. The result of this party sorting is that, in Period 2, the parties are far more ideologically homogeneous. Knowing a voter's party affiliation now provides a great deal of information about her ideology.

The most important point of this example, however, is that between the two periods the aggregate ideological distribution remains unchanged. At all times there are exactly 100 liberals and 100 conservatives (along with the 100 moderates). Despite changes in the numbers of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, the aggregate level of polarization in the electorate is unchanged.

Some analysts prefer to refer to the developments shown in table 2-1 as "partisan polarization." But we think this term only confuses the discussion. We prefer the term "party sorting," reserving the term polarization for bimodal distributions of opinion, or movements toward a bimodal distribution of opinion: voters are polarized on an issue if more of them cluster at the extremes than locate themselves in the center, or if they are moving from centrist positions toward the extremes. As we show in the body of this chapter, the party sorting that has occurred over the past generation has moved the parties further apart from one another, but has not produced bimodal distributions of aggregate opinion. Sorting, rather than polarization, is a more accurate label for the changes we have seen over the past quarter-century.

Given the political changes that have occurred in the United States since the mid-twentieth century, it would be extremely surprising if there had *not* been some party sorting. Consider the political realignment of the South. Forty years ago, the Democratic Party had a much larger proportion of identifiers in the South—many of whose racial and social attitudes and views on national defense were more conservative than those of the national Democratic Party. Later, as Democratic identification fell in the South (particularly among white males), one would logically expect the Democratic Party as a whole to become more homogeneously liberal.

Surprisingly, however, survey data do not register major effects from these political changes. For example, between 1987 and 2003, according to a 2003 survey by the Pew Research Center, the average difference between Republicans and Democrats on twenty-four political and policy items increased by only 5 percentage points (from 12 percent to 17 percent), and the average difference on seventeen social and personal attitudes increased by only 4 percentage points (from 7 percent to 11 percent).¹⁵ These seem like rather small increases,

15. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "The 2004 Political Landscape: Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized," November 5, 2003 (people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=196).

especially because on some issues—such as capital punishment—the official positions of the parties are significantly different, but majorities of both parties are in favor. In light of this, the amount of sorting at the level of ordinary voters hardly seems commensurate with the sorting of Democrats and Republicans at the elite level.

Sorting and Ideology

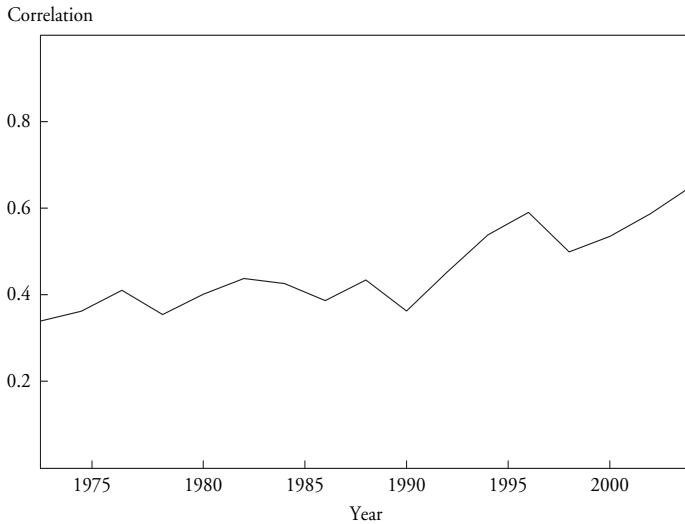
Party identification and ideology are more closely related today than they were in the recent past, and there is general agreement that this closer relationship reflects the relatively greater differentiation of the two parties at the elite level.¹⁶ Some observers have suggested that the election of Ronald Reagan began a period of increasingly sharp differentiation between the two parties at the elite level. Since that time, the positions of the Democratic and Republican parties on key issues such as taxes, abortion, and national defense have become more clearly defined. Furthermore, the strategies used by both parties in Congress to control the legislative agenda have pushed the parties further apart in their public positions.¹⁷ With the parties' elites becoming more differentiated during the 1980s, it would be reasonable to expect to find that ordinary voters cued off these changes (to some degree) and aligned themselves with the party that more closely represented their ideological positions. In other words, when confronted with a clear choice between two increasingly polarized parties, we might expect to see an increasingly strong correlation between the public's ideology and party identification.

Since the early 1970s, the National Election Studies (NES) surveys have asked a nationwide sampling of Americans to classify their political views on a seven-point scale from extremely liberal to extremely conservative and to classify their party identification, also along a seven-point scale, from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Figure 2-1 plots the correlation of these responses for the period 1972 to 2004. Interestingly, the correlation between party and ideology increases almost linearly over this entire period, with sharp increases from the early 1990s to 1996 and again in 2000. But the Reagan years (1981–89) do not particularly stand out.

Yet if party sorting has been taking place in response to elite polarization, we would expect to see an even tighter relationship between partisanship and ideology among voters who are more aware of the differences between the parties'

16. See, for instance, Adams (1997); Abramowitz and Saunders (1998).

17. Roberts and Smith (2003).

Figure 2-1. *Party Identification and Ideology Correlations, 1972–2004.*

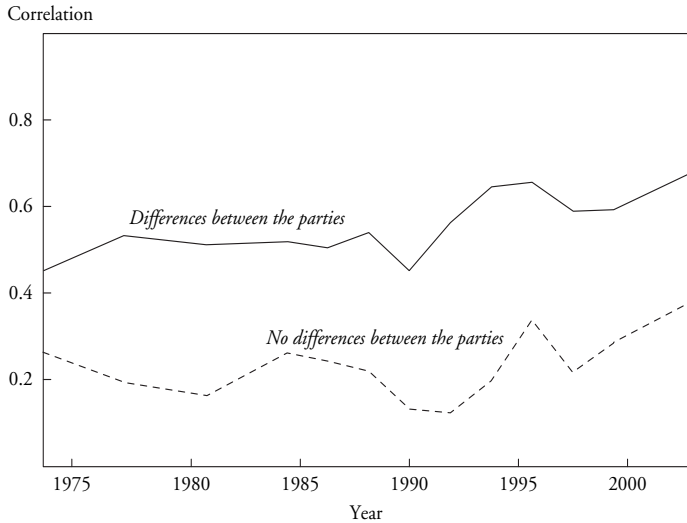
Source: Calculated from the National Election Studies cumulative data file.

elites. To check this proposition, we extended the comparison to two groups of survey respondents in the National Election Studies: those who claimed to see important differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, and those who did not.¹⁸ Figure 2-2 compares the two groups.

Both groups exhibited similar trends of an increasingly strong relationship between partisanship and ideology over the thirty-two-year period. But in every election, respondents who saw important differences between the parties displayed a much stronger relationship between party identification and ideology than those who did not. It may seem odd that the subgroup trends in figure 2-2 are somewhat weaker than the overall pattern in figure 2-1. The explanation is that people have been shifting out of the “see no difference” category into the “see important differences” category. As shown in figure 2-3, the percentage of respondents who claimed to see important differences between

18. The text of the NES question reads, “Do you think there are any important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for?”

Figure 2-2. *Party Identification and Ideology Correlations by Awareness of Elite Polarization, 1972–2004.*



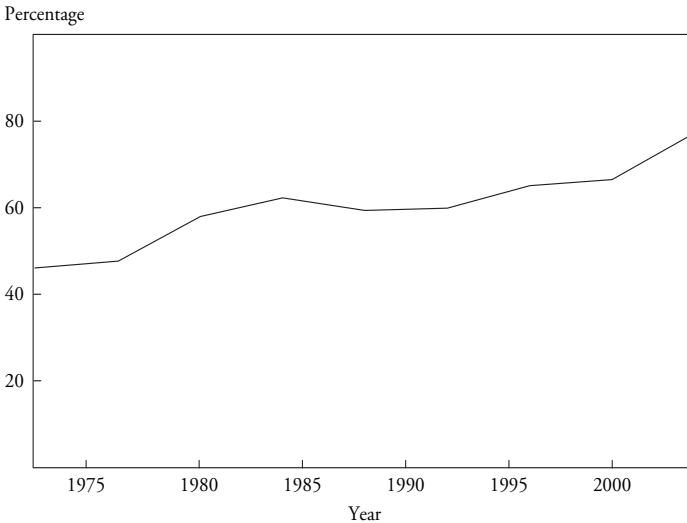
Source: Calculated from the National Election Studies cumulative data file.

the parties has increased steadily over the years—peaking at a stunning 76 percent in 2004.

This much of the story thus sits on solid evidence: as elites became more ideologically distinctive over the past quarter-century, ordinary voters recognized this development and then changed their positions, bringing their party identification and ideology more into alignment with each other.¹⁹ Importantly, however, the pattern among ordinary voters is much weaker than among political elites: while there is almost a total separation between Democratic and Republican members of Congress, the pattern among ordinary voters is somewhat weaker. There has been some party sorting in the mass public in response to elite polarization, but the mass public is not nearly as ideologically divided as party elites.

19. Of course, one cannot draw conclusions about individual voters from aggregate analyses. Levendusky (2006) confirms this inference with an analysis of individual-level panel data, and also finds that conversion (rather than partisan replacement) is most consistent with the observed changes.

Figure 2-3. *Percentage of Respondents Who Saw Important Differences between the Political Parties, 1972–2004.*



Source: Calculated from the National Election Studies cumulative data file.

Sorting and Policy Areas

What if we look for evidence of party sorting below the level of ideology?²⁰ After all, political scientists have long known that voters are not very ideological.²¹ In the typical National Election Studies survey, for instance, one-quarter to one-third of respondents decline even to position themselves ideologically. And when analysts measure ideology alternatively as a statistical constraint among specific issue positions, the usual finding is that the electorate is not very constrained—the simple fact is that people exhibit liberal positions on some issues and conservative positions on others. Perhaps, then, more sorting could be found below the level of broad ideology.

Each election year, the NES surveys Americans' attitudes and views in several policy areas. Policy areas are clusters of related issues, such as social welfare

20. This is similar to earlier works that looked for issue consistency across a variety of different issues. See, for example, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1979).

21. The locus classicus is Converse (1964).

issues, race-related issues, foreign policy and defense issues, and so forth. Previous studies have indicated that more people take consistent positions *within* a specific policy area than *across* areas.²² Here we look at four of the most prominent policy areas discussed in the literature: New Deal social welfare issues, social and cultural issues, racial issues, and defense and military policy issues.²³

What should we expect to find? First, we might expect the correlation between New Deal issue positions and party identification to show little change over time—or even show change in the direction of less party sorting. The basic “role of government in the economy” questions that make up the New Deal issue area have been around since the 1930s, and the relationship to party sorting may have become muted by the time our data begin in 1972. Indeed, the relationship to partisanship may have even declined as racial and social issues increased in prominence.²⁴

Second, we would expect that Democratic and Republican voters have become better sorted on race issues. Carmines and Stimson have shown that party elites became increasingly differentiated on these issues after the 1958 elections, and they suggest that the sorting of ordinary voters followed.²⁵ However, they also suggest that the change among ordinary voters would occur only with a significant lag, as new generations of voters take the place of older generations. We therefore might expect to see some increased sorting in the thirty-year period we examine, but nothing very dramatic.

22. Carmines and Layman (1997); Layman and Carsey (2002).

23. We constructed indexes by taking several items relating to an issue area and calculating each respondent's average position across those issues. For New Deal issues, we used the following NES items: government provision of health insurance (VCF0806); government's role in securing everyone a good job and a standard of living (VCF0809); the government spending/services tradeoff (VCF0839); the amount of government spending on the poor (VCF0886); and government spending on welfare (VCF0894). For racial items, we used whether or not the civil rights movement pushes too fast (VCF0814); whether or not the government should ensure school integration (VCF0816); whether students should be bused to promote school integration (VCF0817); support for Affirmative Action in hiring or promotion (VCF0867A); whether or not the government should ensure that African Americans receive fair treatment in jobs (VCF9037); and how much the government should help minorities (VCF0830). For cultural issues, we used abortion attitudes (VCF0837/VCF0838); school prayer attitudes (VCF9043); attitudes regarding whether or not women and men deserve an equal role (VCF0834); attitudes toward laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination (VCF0876A); attitudes toward homosexuals in the military (VCF0877A); and attitudes toward adoption by homosexual couples (VCF0878). For defense-related items, we used attitudes toward cooperation with the Soviet Union (VCF0841) and attitudes toward defense spending (VCF0843). All two- and four-point items were made into seven-point-scales, and only white respondents were used to construct the racial policy items.

24. Edsall and Edsall (1991); Frank (2004).

25. Carmines and Stimson (1989).

Third, social issues such as equal rights for women, abortion, and school prayer, which were orthogonal to partisan debate a generation ago, have moved to the center of the debate between party elites.²⁶ Thus we might expect these issues to move from being largely unrelated to partisanship in the early years of our data to being more strongly related to party identification today.

Finally, ever since the Vietnam War, Republicans on balance have been the more hawkish party on matters relating to defense and military policy. We would therefore expect to see a strong correlation between defense-related issue positions and party identification over the entire three-decade period. By 2004, however, foreign policy and defense issues had cast the parties' elites into particularly sharp relief, so we may also expect to see a jump between 2000 and 2004.²⁷

Figure 2-4 displays the relationship between partisanship and voter positions in the four policy areas. In each area, there is evidence of a strengthening relationship between the electorate's issue positions and party identification. Given our expectations, it is perhaps surprising to find that over the entire thirty-year period the trend is even more pronounced on New Deal economic issues (as shown by the higher correlation values across the board) than on issues of culture or race. That New Deal issues are increasingly correlated with party identification is strong evidence that popular commentators have overstated the diminished importance of these issues to the electorate.²⁸ For defense-related items, there is little change in the relationship until 2004, suggesting a sharp change in response to the contentious debate over the Iraq war, Afghanistan, and the war on terror.

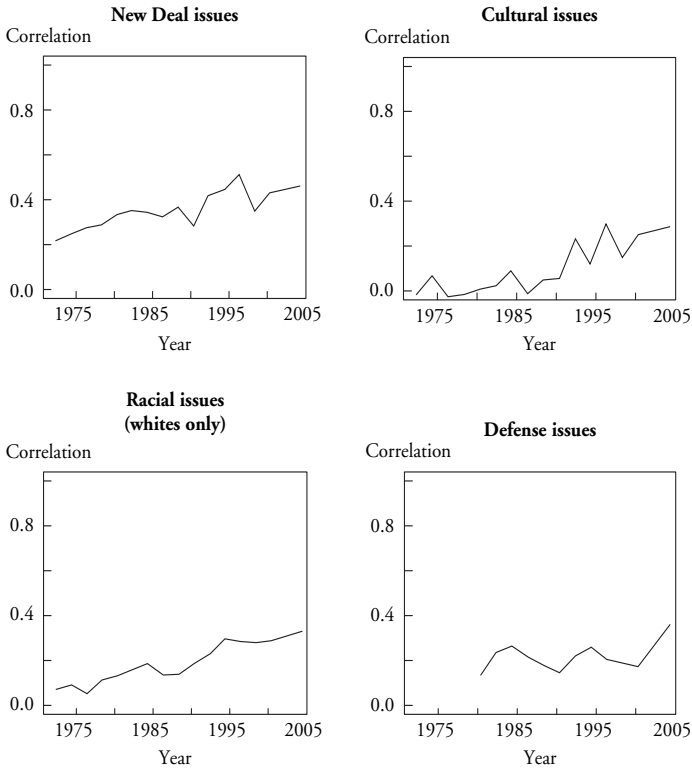
But while there has been some sorting on the various issue areas, it is (again) important not to exaggerate the change that has occurred. Even in 2004,

26. Layman (2001).

27. For example, in the 2004 NES cross section, respondents were asked to rank themselves on a seven-point scale on the issue of whether the United States should attempt to deal with foreign crises via diplomacy or military action. The correlation between self-placement and party ID was 0.43, suggesting a fairly strong relationship between attitudes toward foreign policy and party ID in the most recent election.

28. While the stronger relationship between partisanship and New Deal positions is contrary to the claims of commentators such as Frank (2004), it is consistent with recent research indicating that economic issues have shown no decline as an important cleavage in U.S. elections. See Gelman and others (2005); Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006); Bartels (2006). The lack of sorting on the racial dimension is consistent with Abramowitz's critique of Carmines and Stimson's issue evolution thesis. See Abramowitz (1994).

Figure 2-4. *Party Identification and Voter Positions in Four Policy Areas, 1972–2004.*



Source: Calculated from the National Election Studies cumulative data file. (For details on how these scales were constructed, see note 23 in the text.)

the correlations between partisanship and the racial, social, and defense policy areas were still much closer to zero than to one—numbers that seem a bit shy of “the great sorting-out” discerned by Democratic Party activists William A. Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck.²⁹ The simple fact is that on a variety

29. Galston and Kamarck (2005).

of issues many partisans take positions that are at odds with their party's national stance.³⁰

However, it would be possible for even relatively small increases in sorting on specific policy areas to cumulate into more significant sorting if the individual dimensions somehow became more closely related to one another. To check this possibility, we correlated respondents' positions on the four policy areas with one another. (These patterns are displayed in figure 2-5.) While New Deal attitudes are more strongly related to both racial and cultural attitudes today than they were a generation ago, cultural and racial issues show no sign of a closer relationship.³¹ Again, the evidence tends to support the sorting thesis, but the patterns are not especially strong.

Sorting and Specific Issues

Even if there is not strong evidence of sorting on the level of general ideology or in broad issue areas, it is possible that voters have sorted on one or two important issues. For example, Democrats and Republicans could be quite far apart on abortion yet have very muted differences over women's equality.³² Sorting could be occurring on different issues, at different times, and among different groups, and averaging everything together may obscure significant trends and differences.

To get a sense of whether specific issues might be driving party sorting, we examined six issues in the NES surveys—three New Deal economic issues (whether government should provide health insurance, whether it should ensure jobs and a good standard of living, and how government should balance spending and services), two social issues (abortion and school prayer), and a race issue (whether the government should provide economic assistance to blacks and minorities). Given the trends observed for each of the broad policy areas, we would expect that positions on some of these issues must be more strongly related to partisanship today than a generation ago.

But how should we measure sorting on these specific issues? Because the individual items vary in question format (and therefore reliability), comparing correlations across items is inappropriate here.³³ Therefore, to measure sorting

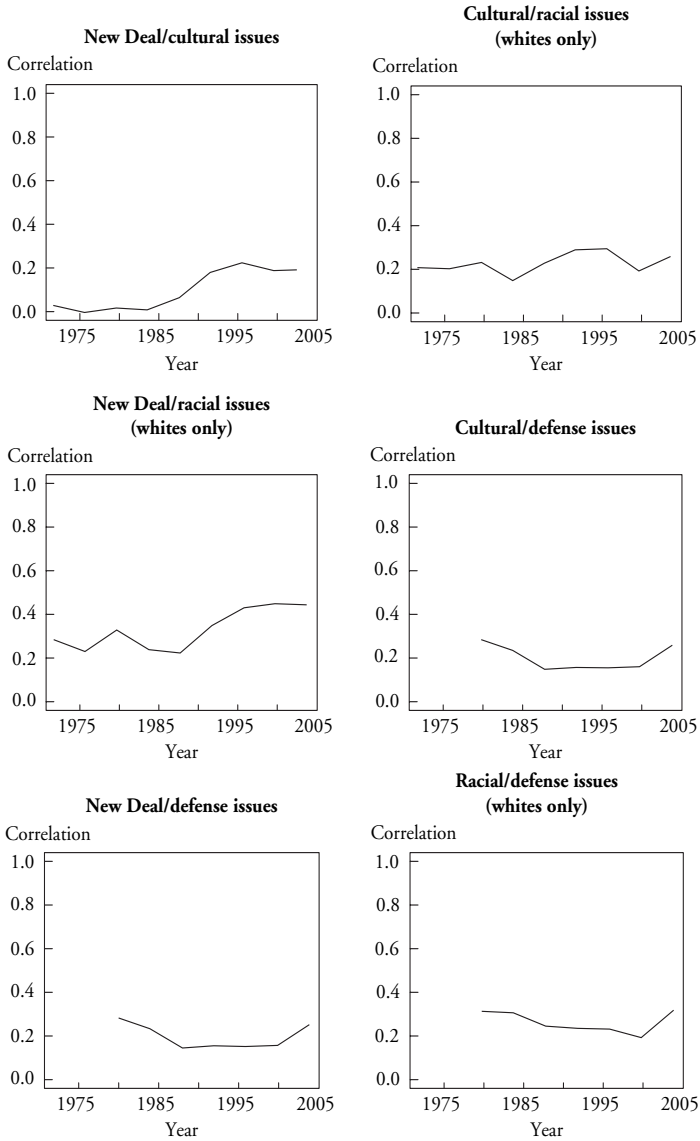
30. See Hillygus and Shields (2005). One other point worth noting here is that the sorting evident in specific policy areas is not as linear as that shown by the more general ideology measure. In particular, figure 2-4 suggests that the spike in those seeing no difference between the major political parties in 1996 (in figure 2-2) may owe a lot to the volatility in the relationship between partisanship and the New Deal and cultural issue positions.

31. Comparisons on racial items are based on analysis of white respondents only.

32. See Sanbonmatsu (2002).

33. Krosnick and Berent (1993).

Figure 2-5. Correlations between Voter Positions in Four Policy Areas, 1972–2004.



Source: Calculated from the National Election Studies cumulative data file.

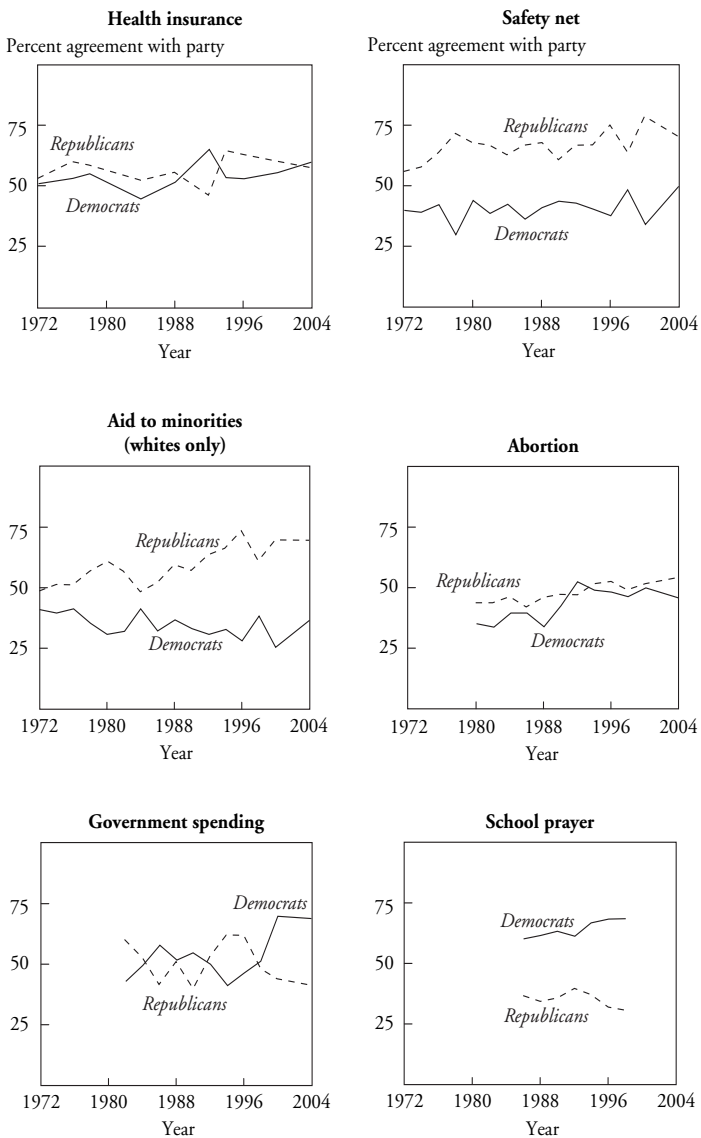
across issues, we calculated the percentage of respondents who shared their party's national position on each issue.³⁴ The results are summarized in the graphs in figure 2-6. The most notable feature of the graphs is the lack of clear patterns. On some issues there appears to have been little sorting, and on other issues the sorting appears to be limited mostly to one party. On the issue of government-provided health insurance, for instance, there is not much sorting going on in either party—in the aggregate, the mass parties look more or less as they did thirty years ago. But on the issue of whether the government should ensure jobs for its citizens and provide a social safety net, Republicans have become somewhat more inclined to share their party's view that government should let each person get ahead on his or her own. Democrats exhibit no trend (unless the uptick in 2004 is the start of one). The tradeoff between more government services and lower taxes shows Democrats becoming better sorted and Republicans becoming somewhat less well sorted.

On the long-standing issue of whether or not the government should help minorities, we limited our analysis to the responses of white respondents, since that is where we would expect partisan sorting to occur. Over time, white Republicans have become better sorted on the issue, with a large majority now in agreement with the party position that blacks and other minorities should help themselves. But Democrats' views are almost unchanged over the thirty-year period. Even as the South realigned, white Democrats did not become any more liberal—and a majority of Democrats, in fact, remain out of step with the party position that government should provide assistance.

Of the issues we examined, the results for abortion and school prayer were perhaps the most interesting. Arguably, there has been no single issue in American politics during the last generation that has attracted as much attention and created as much controversy among party elites as abortion. Indeed, abortion has become a "litmus test" candidates must pass in order to advance to the highest ranks of their party. Not surprisingly, the graph for the abortion issue indicates that as the parties became more clearly identified with pro-life or pro-choice positions at the elite level, the mass public followed suit.

34. All but two of these items are measured using seven-point scales. For simplicity, on the seven-point scales a Democrat takes her party's position if she takes a position to the left of the midpoint, and a Republican takes her party's position if she takes a position to the right of the midpoint. For the school prayer item, we assume that the Democratic position is one of the two more liberal answers and that the Republican position is one of the two more conservative answers. For the coding of the abortion item, see note 36.

Figure 2-6. *Percentage of Respondents Who Took Their Party's Position on Various Issues, 1972–2004.*



Source: Calculated from the National Election Studies cumulative data file.

Table 2-2. *Responses to the Question, When Should Abortion Be Permitted?*

Percent

<i>Response</i>	<i>Strong Democrats</i>	<i>Strong Republicans</i>
Never permitted	10	22
Only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger	23	37
For a clear need	13	18
Always as a personal choice	54	23

Source: 2004 National Election Study.

But here, too, we encounter the limits of the sorting thesis. As previous studies have shown, the abortion issue shows evidence of sorting for both parties.³⁵ Yet sorting at the mass level still falls far short of that among party elites. In the 2004 NES surveys, more than 40 percent of self-described “strong Republicans” and “strong Democrats” did not support the stated positions of their party’s elites on abortion—and just about the same percentage of strong Republicans say abortion should always be a legal, personal choice as the percentage who said it should never be legal.³⁶ Thus, even for citizens who claimed the strongest attachments to their political parties (and who were therefore most likely to be aware of their party’s position), there was considerable heterogeneity on this issue of abortion. This can be seen in the data in table 2-2.

While the Republican Party platform is staunchly pro-life, Republicans in the larger electorate are far from unified on the issue. And while Democrats are less divided than Republicans (a majority of strong Democrats say abortion should always be legal), it seems fair to conclude that more than one-third of them believe that abortion laws should be more restrictive than those favored by the national party. Even though abortion has caused a significant amount of sorting to occur in both parties, adherents of the two parties remain internally divided.³⁷

35. See Adams (1997); Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, chap. 5).

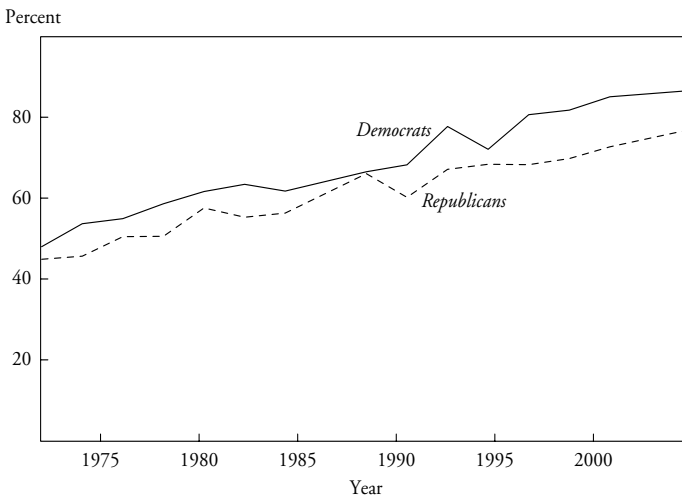
36. The NES item gives the respondent four options: (1) by law, abortion should never be permitted; (2) the law should permit abortion only in the case of rape or incest, or when the woman’s life is in danger; (3) the law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established; (4) by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice. We assume that the official Republican position is that abortion should never be permitted or be permitted only in cases of rape, incest, or a threat to the life of the woman, and we assume the Democratic position is that abortion should always be allowed.

37. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, chap. 5) show that this conclusion does not depend on the NES survey item.

The issue of school prayer is interesting because, here, we encounter a surprising countertrend. Over time, Democrats became more accepting of their party's position (opposition to mandatory school prayer), while Republicans became less accepting of their party's position (support for school prayer). In each election year survey, a majority of respondents—including a majority of Republicans and a near-majority of Democrats—supported a moderate position: "The law should allow public schools to schedule time when children can pray silently if they want to." Even if party elites remained sharply divided over school prayer, the mass public did not.

The issue of equal rights for women exhibits a pattern similar to that for school prayer. Figure 2-7 shows the percentage of self-identified Republicans and Democrats who stated a position on the liberal end of the scale ("women and men should have an equal role" as contrasted with "women's place is in the home"). By 2004, support for equality for women had become the clear position in both parties—by huge majorities. In other words, over the past twenty-five years or so, Americans have moved toward a consensus on this once-contentious issue.

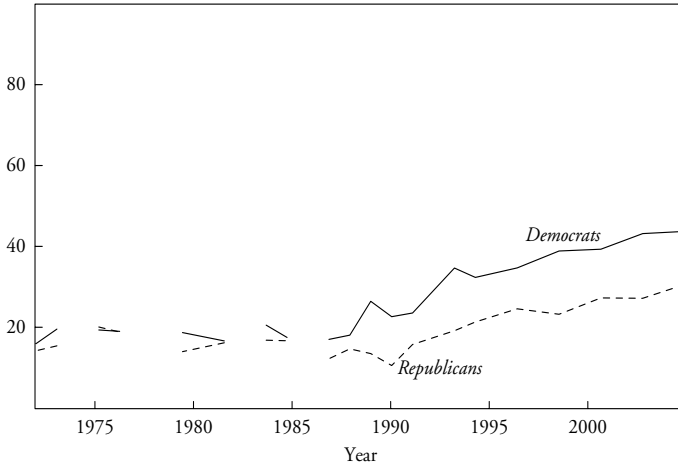
Figure 2-7. *Percentage of Respondents Who Took a Liberal Position on the Issue of Women's Equality, 1972–2004.*



Source: Calculated from the National Election Studies cumulative data file.

Figure 2-8. *Percentage of Respondents Who Express Support for Same-Sex Relations, 1972–2004.*

Percent supporting



Source: Calculated from the General Social Surveys.

Finally, consider the issue of gay rights. In 2004, same-sex marriage in Massachusetts and San Francisco was a hot-button issue on the campaign trail. While survey organizations have begun to ask people about gay marriage only recently, the General Social Surveys include a long-time series on the public's attitudes on same-sex relations. Figure 2-8 plots the percentages of Democrats and Republicans who stated that same-sex relations are "only wrong sometimes" or "not at all wrong." Among adherents of both parties there is a noticeable trend toward acceptance of the morality of homosexual relationships. Even if Americans are still divided on the issue of gay marriage, there seems to be growing agreement that gays and lesbians deserve equal treatment.³⁸

38. The GSS also asks about support for homosexual civil liberties (whether or not the respondent would allow a homosexual to teach in a college or university, allow a homosexual to give a speech in the local community, or allow a book written by a homosexual in favor of homosexuality to remain in a public library). Analyses of these items not reported here find the same patterns. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, chap. 6) document a similar pattern of growing tolerance for homosexuals in various spheres of American life.

In sum, abortion is the only social issue we examined that still exerts a strong push on party sorting. The other cultural issues—school prayer, women’s rights, and gay rights—are ones on which the partisan attitudes of ordinary citizens seem to be converging rather than diverging. Far from party sorting contributing to a culture war organized around these issues, an increasing number of ordinary Americans appear to be walking away from the conflicts that characterize the party elites.³⁹

Conclusion

Survey data reveal some evidence of party sorting over the past generation in U.S. politics. The party attachments of ordinary Americans have become more closely associated with their ideological self-classifications and with their positions on some issues. Moreover, several broad policy areas have become more closely related to one another. But the same data also show that the increase in sorting over the three decades has been modest, contrary to what is often asserted. This extended consideration of sorting in the mass electorate does not ultimately take us very far toward an explanation of the polarization among political elites.

Our findings contradict any simple assumption that the polarization of America’s political class is a direct reflection of a similarly polarized mass electorate, even considering that the electorate is now better sorted than it was a generation ago. While superficially puzzling, common expectations about a tight relationship between constituents and their representatives overlook the intervening role of institutions in the American electoral process. Public officials are not elected by a direct popular vote of the country at large, as our national fixation with polling implicitly suggests. Public officials are instead elected by the electorates of fifty states, 435 congressional districts, and thousands of other local jurisdictions. Within jurisdictions, candidates must win

39. There is always the possibility that sorting may only have occurred for some demographic subgroups. To double-check the patterns (and non-patterns) reported on the six issues, we examined the percentage of respondents in various subgroups who supported their party’s positions. We considered three obvious comparisons: men vs. women, Southerners vs. non-Southerners, and whites vs. African-Americans. While subgroups differ in expected ways (women tended to be more liberal than men, whites more conservative than blacks, etc.), the differences are small and the general findings are the same, so in the interest of space we do not include those figures here. The important point is simply that sorting does not seem to differ much by demographic subgroups.

primary elections, where turnout is often extremely low and less representative than in general elections. And in both primary and general elections, candidates sorely need both money and organizational backing in order to appeal to their electorates.⁴⁰ We think that research on popular political preferences points inexorably to the conclusion that the impact of a higher degree of internal party homogeneity is magnified by electoral arrangements. Once again, institutions matter.

The boundaries of political jurisdictions are subject to change and political manipulation (except those for statewide offices). Both academic and popular commentators have pointed an accusing finger at partisan redistricting as a source of elite polarization. The logic of the accusation seems plausible enough: Creating districts that are safe for one party or the other reduces the incentive for candidates to take moderate positions. But as Thomas E. Mann of the Brookings Institution discusses in his essay in this volume, the evidence (however plausible) that partisan gerrymandering is the major culprit in the polarization of the political class seems quite weak.

Our (tentative) view is that primaries are a more likely arena in which to find explanations of political polarization. As noted previously, turnout in primary elections is usually very low, so a few score committed supporters (at least on the lower rungs of the electoral ladder) can be a critically important foundation for a campaign. And, as Matthew S. Levendusky has demonstrated, committed supporters—those who will give money to a candidate or a party, attend a meeting or a rally, or get involved in other ways—are more likely to be found in the ranks of the politically sorted.⁴¹ In the 2004 elections, for example, more than 80 percent of those who engaged in three or more campaign activities (a standard definition of “campaign activist”) were sorted. The structure of American electoral institutions amplifies the influence of such voters—and their impact is felt most in primary elections.

Even though few incumbents face serious primary challenges, it would be a mistake to conclude that primary elections are unimportant. In all likelihood, incumbents act strategically to preclude primary challenges. Even if they are unlikely to face a challenge, candidates take special pains to maintain the support of their party’s hard-core voters. One of us has offered this phenomenon as a possible explanation for the Clinton impeachment vote:

40. The primary election loss of Senator Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) to a political neophyte in August 2006 comes to mind.

41. Levendusky (2006).

When moderate House Republicans announced that they would vote to impeach President Clinton in the winter of 1998, it was widely interpreted as party pressure, since most such incumbents had indicated they personally favored censure rather than impeachment. The media clearly favored this interpretation, and certainly there was enough bluster within Congress to suggest that it was operating. But it is also very plausible, and consistent with my observation of a few of these members, that they were making a calculation of the following sort: "If I do not vote for impeachment, I will antagonize the hard-core partisans in my district. That certainly may hurt me in the primary, and even if I get by that, it will hurt me in the general election."⁴²

If members anticipate potential challenges from the ideological poles, they will act preemptively to diminish the chances of that occurring. As sorting occurs, more and more candidates find themselves in such circumstances. Because sorting produces a more homogeneous and a more extreme primary electorate, the pressure increases for candidates to take consistently liberal or conservative positions on most issues, even when moderation would be more helpful in the general election. Thus sorted partisans move candidates toward noncentrist positions.⁴³ And it is not a large leap to presume that these same voters pressure members to support noncentrist policies after being elected.⁴⁴

The interaction between party sorting and primary elections may go some way toward explaining the disconnect between voters and candidates in contemporary American politics. At first glance, it is puzzling that masses and elites look so fundamentally different—a disconnect that contradicts basic assumptions political theorists make about representation. But even if the majority of Americans remain largely centrist, an increasing number of citizens line up on the same end of the spectrum as their party, and these sorted citizens play a critical role in campaigns and elections. Candidates must respond accordingly.⁴⁵

42. Fiorina (2001, p. 157).

43. Aldrich (1995).

44. Brady, Han, and Pope (forthcoming 2007) show that members of Congress whose positions diverge from those of their primary electorates are more likely to attract primary challengers, even if they are more attuned to the sentiments of their districts as a whole.

45. We also believe that candidates today are more personally extreme than they were in previous eras of American politics, perhaps because they emerge from the many cause groups that have joined more traditional groups and organizations on the political scene. Candidates more personally committed to policy positions may be willing to take greater electoral risks than others who value holding office relatively more highly than making policy. Although we think this a very important subject for further research, there is no denying that systematic research in the area is difficult.