

Interpreting Policy Polarization by Crowdsourcing “Correct” Attitude Alignment (Proposal Summary)

Republicans and Democrats increasingly disagree about various policy issues (Collitt and Highton 2021; Dimock 2014). Why? And is this manner of *policy polarization*¹ bad for democracy?

One explanation for policy polarization is that Republicans and Democrats increasingly choose what policies to support by blindly following the leaders of their political party (Lenz 2012). Another interpretation says that Republicans and Democrats have genuine differences in one or more predispositions—e.g., values, personality traits, needs—and partisans have gotten better at aligning their policy preferences with their predispositions (M. S. Levendusky 2010).

Arbitrating between these two possibilities is normatively important: If blind partisan conformity drives policy polarization, it would suggest that elected officials are democratically unconstrained, and citizens’ policy preferences may be out of sync with their predispositions. By contrast, if mass partisans have gotten better at aligning their policy preferences with their predispositions, then policy polarization is arguably *good* for democracy.² To what extent, then, are citizens’ policy preferences truly “aligned” with their predispositions?

Though much has been written about this question, it remains difficult to know the answer. This is largely because it is hard to determine which policy preferences truly “follow from” which predispositions. Correlations between predispositions and policy preferences abound, but it is often unclear how to interpret these correlations. For example, socially traditional values correlate with conservative economic preferences (P. Goren et al. 2016). Yet, there is seemingly no intrinsic connection between social traditionalism and free-market capitalism (Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017; Malka, Lelkes, and Soto 2019). Indeed, other recent evidence suggests that correlations between self-reported ideology and policy preferences—traditionally taken as evidence of ideological constraint—partly signal group conformity (Groenendyk, Kimbrough, and Pickup 2022).

Which predispositions logically entail which policy preferences? To answer this question, I propose to use the *wisdom of crowds* (Becker, Porter, and Centola 2019; Surowiecki 2005). Specifically, I propose to examine whether citizens—setting aside what predispositions and policy preferences they themselves hold—can agree on which predispositions and policy preferences are logically connected. My approach is relatively simple: I will measure citizens’ attitudes about several oft-studied predispositions in political behavior. Additionally, I will ask citizens to what extent particular predispositions constitute likely reasons that a person might endorse certain policy preferences (already measured by the Polarization Research Lab).

Determining which predispositions logically entail which policy preferences is important for several reasons. As alluded to above, it allows us to better understand why Republicans’ and Democrats’ policy preferences have polarized and whether it is normatively good. Additionally, it informs us more broadly about the quality of policy representation: Citizens are regularly asked to vote on referenda and ballot initiatives. Moreover, citizens’ policy preferences are thought to drive which candidates they vote for (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood 2021). Insofar as citizens’ predispositions fail to translate into the right policy preferences,

¹ Scholars disagree about whether citizens’ policy preferences are becoming more extreme overall or simply more aligned with party identification (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008). However, one thing is clear: Across several issues, Republicans’ preferences have moved rightward while Democrats’ preferences have moved leftward.

² To be sure, policy polarization has been connected to worrisome trends like partisan animosity (e.g., Orr and Huber 2020). Yet, this does not imply that policy polarization *in itself* is bad: Partisan animosity can be addressed independently of policy polarization (M. Levendusky 2023).

citizens may direct the government to implement policies that go *against* what they truly want or need.

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