The Polarized Presidency: Depth and Breadth of Public Partisanship

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We examine the extent of partisan polarization in the public’s views of the president from 1972 to 2008, extending earlier studies by placing the George W. Bush administration in historical context and exploring the depth and breadth of polarization. We find that the party gap in presidential approval has grown significantly over time. Moreover, over time, more inpartisans strongly approve of the president and more outpartisans strongly disapprove. In addition, polarization has become broader, as assessments of economic conditions, the president’s handling of foreign relations, perceptions of the ideological difference between the president and citizens, and views of the president’s competence and morality have become increasingly partisan. We offer suggestive evidence that especially positive or negative views of the economy and “rally” events can alter the extent of polarization. Ultimately, the depth and breadth of polarization may hold dire implications for presidential governance.

In its last issue before the 2004 presidential election, *Time* magazine declared, “by last week the Republicans were all but declaring that your children will die a gruesome death if John Kerry wins, and Kerry was warning that if you catch the flu, it's because George W. Bush screwed up your shot” (Gibbs 2008, 29). Journalistic accounts of a bitterly divided public had become standard fare after the 2000 election and remained a mainstay of coverage of the 2004 election (see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006). Over the last decade or so, political scientists have examined the degree of partisan polarization in American politics more systematically (if less colorfully) than their journalistic counterparts (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2001; Jacobson 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Nivola and Brady 2008). We add to the study of polarization by asking how deep and wide is polarization in public views of presidents and how does polarization during the George W. Bush presidency compare to earlier administrations. We find that the trends of increasing partisan polarization identified during the Clinton administration (Bond and Fleisher 2001) continued during much of the Bush administration. Moreover, the depth and breadth of partisan polarization has also increased in recent decades: views about various facets of presidential performance have become significantly polarized. We offer suggestive evidence that major political events and economic conditions that are especially positive or negative tend to suppress the degree of partisan polarization in presidential approval. Ultimately, the depth and breadth of partisan polarization may hold grim implications for presidential governance.

We extend the findings of earlier studies in four ways. First, we broaden the period of study to cover 1972 to 2008. This period begins much before some studies and extends later than others to provide a longer view of polarization in evaluations of the president than
previously offered. We know that prior to the George W. Bush presidency, partisans were increasingly polarized in their views of presidents (Bond and Fleisher 2001) and that Republicans and Democrats often held radically different views of George W. Bush (see esp. Jacobson 2008). Putting the Bush 43 presidency in a larger context demonstrates both that polarization actually increased beyond the existing trends to reach historically high levels.

Second, we probe the depth of partisan polarization by examining the strength of approval or disapproval of presidential performance. Third, we examine the extent of partisan polarization in important additional attitudes toward the president, including evaluations of the president’s handling of the economy and foreign affairs, his personal character traits, and views of the president’s ideological distance from individuals. Fourth, we offer suggestive evidence about some of the causes of polarization in approval. Such an analysis is timely, allowing us to take stock of trends in partisan polarization as Barack Obama takes the helm of the ship of state with a pledge to restore bipartisanship.

**Partisanship and Presidential Approval: Literature and Hypotheses**

Despite disagreement over the extent of polarization among the public (see esp. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006), two studies in particular have presented clear evidence that Americans’ views of the president have polarized along party lines. Examining data from 1972 to 2000, Bond and Fleisher (2001) identified a trend of increasingly polarized responses to the standard presidential approval question, “do you approve or disapprove of the way [the president] is handling his job as president.” More recently, Gary Jacobson (2008) outlined in great detail the extent of partisan polarization during the first six years of the George W. Bush administration, highlighting both the extraordinary partisan unity in the months after 9/11 and the extreme levels of polarization since then.
Bond and Fleisher (2001) and Jacobson (2008) offer us a great many insights into the polarization of presidential evaluations, but of course, these two studies cannot tell the whole story. Bond and Fleisher’s study was published in the early days of the George W. Bush administration, a period that Jacobson (2008) makes clear became incredibly polarized. Jacobson’s account, on the other hand, digs deep into the Bush administration, providing historical parallels at various turns, but focusing on the Bush presidency. We extend Bond and Fleisher’s analysis to see whether the trajectory of increasing polarization continued during the Bush administration, while moving back in time to the Nixon administration to provide historical context to Jacobson’s book on the Bush presidency.

Bond and Fleisher tested two hypotheses regarding partisanship and presidential approval. First, “the gap in presidential approval of Democratic and Republican respondents has widened over time” and second, “the effect of partisanship on the individual’s assessment of the economy has increased over time” (Bond and Fleisher 2001, 533). They found strong evidence to support the first hypothesis and suggestive evidence in support of the second. To test the first hypothesis, they examined the difference between the percentage among those who identify with the president’s party (inpartisans) who approved and the percentage of approvers among those who identify with the other party (outpartisans) in the American National Election Studies (ANES) from 1972 to 2000. Unsurprisingly, inpartisans were much more likely to approve of the president’s performance than outpartisans. More interestingly, they found that the partisan gap had increased significantly over the three decades of study. As they report, “in the four surveys from 1972 to 1980, the average partisan gap was .40; in surveys since 1982, the average partisan gap increased to .51” (534).
Beyond this direct effect of partisanship on presidential approval, they found some evidence of an indirect effect; assessments of the economy, long known to affect presidential approval, appeared to have become increasingly partisan. Although the evidence on this score was not perfectly clear, the correlation between views of whether the national economy has gotten better, stayed the same, or gotten worse over the past year (retrospective economic assessments) and partisanship increased from .11 in the 1972-1980 period, to .18 from 1982-2000. Thus, although partisanship may always color perceptions of politically relevant phenomena, “the role of enduring partisan commitments in shaping attitudes toward political objects” (Campbell, et al. 1960, 135) may have been increasing since the 1970s (see also Bartels 2000, 2002). Importantly, however, Bond and Fleisher note that sometimes the real world impinges on the correlation between partisanship and views of the economy. At times economic conditions appear to be so unfavorable or so favorable that even the fiercest of partisans have little about which to disagree.

Testing these two hypotheses in a longer time period enables us to see whether the trends Bond and Fleisher identified continued unabated during the George W. Bush administration and to put the partisan polarization Jacobson (2008) documented in historical context. We also test two additional hypotheses. Jacobson noted that views of George W. Bush were not simply polarized in the sense that a vast majority of Republicans approved of Bush while the vast majority of Democrats disapproved, but that the polarization was also deep. Many Republicans strongly approved of Bush while many Democrats strongly disapproved. Although his focus on the Bush presidency precluded a systematic test of the idea, Jacobson offers some suggestive evidence that this depth of partisan polarization was unprecedented. We test this notion in a more systematic way here. Specifically, we hypothesize that the strength of partisans’
(dis)approval has become more polarized over time. If so, we should see an increasing gap between inpartisans’ and outpartisans’ average approval on a four-point scale ranging from strong disapproval to strong approval.

We also extend the logic of Bond and Fleisher’s second hypothesis, which suggests indirect effects of partisanship on presidential approval. In addition to views of economic conditions, recent research has identified several other individual-level attitudes that are significantly related to presidential approval, including assessments of the president’s handling of the economy (economic approval) and foreign relations (foreign relations approval), assessments of the president’s morality and competence, and individuals’ perceptions of the ideological distance between themselves and the president (see Kinder 1986; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Greene 2001; Goren 2002; Newman 2003, 2004). To assess the breadth of partisan polarization in views of the president, we will test the hypothesis that these factors related to presidential approval have become more partisan over time.

This fourth hypothesis is significant because if many views that are related to presidential approval have become polarized, individuals’ approval or disapproval of the president may become entrenched. An outpartisan who strongly disapproves of the way the president is handling the economy and foreign relations, who has a strongly negative view of the president’s competence and morality, and perceives a significant gap between her own ideological views and those of the president is unlikely to approve of the president. In fact, she is unlikely to ever be convinced to hold a positive view of the president on any of these dimensions given the negative views on all the other dimensions. Even if the president convinced this outpartisan to approve of his stewardship of the economy, the outpartisan’s negative views of several other aspects of the
president’s performance are presumably more than strong enough to keep her squarely in the disapproving camp. The reverse story could be told of an inpartisan with favorable views across various dimensions of evaluation. This inpartisan is unlikely to alter her approval of the president even in the face of negative news about the president on one or two of these dimensions of presidential performance.

The Party Gap in Approval over Time

To test the four hypotheses, we return to the ANES, analyzing the biennial studies from 1972 to 2008. Simply examining the difference in the percentage of inpartisans and outpartisans who approve of the president’s performance provides considerable support for the first hypothesis, that polarization has increased over time (see Figure 1). Although the trend is not monotonic, there is a significant increase in the size of the party gap in approval over time. To see this, we regressed the party gap in approval on a time counter that begins at one in 1972 and increased by one for each successive survey. The regression results are presented in Table 1, which shows that each year, the party gap is estimated to increase by about 1 point. Over 19 surveys, the model predicts an increase in the party gap from about 39 to 58 points. Visually, we can see the estimated trend line, along with the 95% confidence intervals for the trend. Figure 1 demonstrates the importance of examining the Bush presidency, which did its fair share to contribute to this trend, breaking new historical ground. The partisan gap in both 2004 and 2006, reaching 60 and even 70 percentage points, was greater than in any of the other years during the period of study. The partisan gap in approval in these two years exceeded the gaps that so struck Bond and Fleisher at the end of the Clinton administration. In fact, if we exclude the George W. Bush presidency and only estimate the trend for the 1972 to 2000 period (see Table 1 column 2),
the estimated increase in polarization is slightly lower (.94 compared to 1.06) and the p value for the time trend declines from .01 to .10 (two-tailed tests).

[Figure 1 about here]

[Table 1 about here]

Rather than simply looking at a linear trend, examining differences across presidencies offers another way to consider change over time. Table 2 shows a regression of the party gap on indicator variables for each president, with Nixon (1972) as the excluded point of comparison. Column 1 shows that the party gap was different from that of the Nixon presidency to a statistically significant degree only during the George W. Bush presidency (p < .10). Because of the relatively small number of studies we are working with, throughout our analysis we will take a conservative approach to statistical significance and also examine estimated coefficients. Compared to 1972, the party gap was 21.5 points greater during the George W. Bush presidency, 14 points greater during the Clinton presidency, 9 points greater during the George H.W. Bush years, and 17 points greater during Reagan’s presidency. In contrast, the party gap was virtually the same throughout the presidencies of the 1970s. In fact, if we compare the presidents after the 1970s to those of the 1970s, the party gap in approval was significantly greater for each president except George H. W. Bush (see column 2). In either specification, we can see that polarization reached new levels during the George W. Bush presidency. The results presented thus far demonstrate the importance of putting the Bush 43 presidency in historical context; party polarization, already increasing before the 2000 election, reached new heights during the Bush 43 presidency.

[Table 2 about here]
Significantly, however, not the entire Bush presidency reached historic levels of polarization. As Jacobson (2008) noted, in 2002, roughly a year after the 9/11 attacks, partisan polarization was somewhat muted as almost half of Democrats (46%) continued to approve of Bush. In addition, in 2008, in the context of dismal economic conditions, polarization was again somewhat muted, this time for the opposite reason—in partisan approval of Bush reached the lowest level in the period of study (56%). These points remind us that either very high or very low aggregate approval will limit the degree of partisan polarization.

**The Depth of Partisan Polarization in Presidential Approval**

Beyond simply lining up on different sides of the approval question, partisans have held increasingly strong evaluations of the president. The simple approve/disapprove dichotomy does not fully convey the extent of partisan feelings towards presidents. Starting in 1980, the ANES has asked respondents whether they (dis)approve of the way the president is handling his job strongly or not strongly, creating a 4-point approval measure (disapprove strongly, disapprove not strongly, approve not strongly, and approve strongly).

The difference between in partisans’ and out partisans’ average strength of approval on this 4-point measure provides a view of the depth of partisan polarization in approval. Figure 2 shows that the depth of polarization has varied over time, but as the regression line demonstrates, the trend is toward deeper polarization. However, table 1 shows that the time trend does not reach statistical significance (p = .27), so we cannot draw firm conclusions (to avoid overly busy figures, we omit the 95% confidence intervals and refer to the tables for questions of statistical significance). Looking president by president does point to significant increases, as the party gap in the strength of approval was significantly greater than the comparison category of Carter (1980) during the Reagan (p < .10), Clinton (p = .106), and Bush 43 (p < .05) presidencies.
Once again, we see that polarization peaked during the Bush 43 presidency, with an estimated .54 increase in polarization over 1980 (on a 4 point scale), and the Reagan years, when polarization was .48 points greater than it was in 1980.

[Figure 2 about here]

Looking closely at the data highlights some important findings. In 1982 and 1984, 55 and 64% of Republicans strongly approved of Reagan, while 55 and 39% of Democrats strongly disapproved. In the years following, partisanship tempered somewhat, but the partisan gap deepened again during the George W. Bush administration. Partisan polarization peaked in 2004, in the context of a contentious presidential election and the polarizing Iraq War. While 66% of Republicans strongly approved of George W. Bush, 63% of Democrats strongly disapproved of him, which may partly explain the doomsday scenarios noted at the paper’s outset. After George W. Bush won the election, his second term brought many problems that contributed to his decline in popularity, especially the response to Hurricane Katrina and the continuing war in Iraq. Naturally, Democrats responded to these crises with stronger disapproval, but Republicans also reacted by beginning to approve of Bush less strongly than they had previously. Thus, the partisan gap between Democratic and Republican approval of Bush shrank in 2006 and 2008 as he became more broadly unpopular. If we exclude 2008 from the model in Table 2, column 3, the estimate for the Bush 43 presidency jumps from .54 to .62 (if we estimate the model in Table 1, column 3 excluding 2008, the slope of the trend line is steeper, but still not statistically significant at conventional levels as p = .18).

The decline in the strength of polarization in 2006 and 2008 may be the exception that proves the rule of increasing polarization. In 2006, despite flagging approval among Republicans a year after Katrina and an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, conditions that may
have mitigated partisan polarization, the partisan gap in strength of approval was still slightly
greater than average for the 14 studies in Figure 2. That the partisan gap in strength of approval
remained at such high levels in the face of such negative conditions highlights the polarized state
of the public during the George W. Bush administration. Similarly, in 2008, even in the context
of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, along with the lingering memory of
Katrina and the still unpopular war, polarization in strength of approval remained higher than
some earlier years (1980, 1986, 1990, and 1998). During the younger Bush administration, even
when conditions pressed inpartisans and oupartisans in the same direction, polarization remained
deep.

The Breadth of Partisan Polarization

Partisanship is also increasingly affecting approval in indirect ways. Bond and Fleisher
presented suggestive evidence that partisanship is increasingly affecting views of national
economic conditions, which shape evaluations of the president. Updating their analysis provides
stronger evidence that partisanship is in fact increasingly coloring perceptions of the economy.
Figure 3 plots the correlation between partisanship and retrospective perceptions of the national
economy. Although the degree of correlation waxes and wanes over time, there is an upward
trend, one that is statistically significant at the .10 level (see Table 1, column 4). Here we see a
clear benefit to including the George W. Bush presidency. Prior to the Bush 43 presidency, the
time trend fell far short of statistical significance. (p = .80). However, these views had become
so partisan during the younger Bush administration that the overall trend is now statistically
distinguishable. Whereas Bond and Fleisher’s original study could only offer suggestive
evidence that economic perceptions were becoming more polarized, we now have strong
evidence that this has occurred. Looking president by president reveals a familiar pattern (see
Table 3: Economic assessments were most closely correlated to partisanship during the Bush 43 presidency, when the correlation was an estimated .19 points greater than in 1972, and the Reagan years, when the correlation was .15 greater than 1972.

[Figure 3 about here]

[Table 3 about here]

It is important to note that in years with clearly poor economic conditions (especially 1978 and 2008), the correlation is attenuated as even in partisans generally had negative views of the economy, suggesting that the real world impinges on partisanship’s capacity to color perceptions. Even though economic perceptions in 2008 were decidedly less partisan than in the past, the average correlation between partisanship and retrospective economic assessments during the four studies of the Bush administration reached .22, exceeding the averages for earlier periods that Bond and Fleisher (2001) noted (see above).

Partisanship is increasingly coloring other perceptions and judgments that affect presidential approval as well. Figure 4 graphs the correlation between partisanship and approval of the president’s handling of the economy from 1984 to 2008 (excluding 2006, when the question was not asked). Unsurprisingly, these evaluations of the president have always been more partisan than views of economic conditions. However, there is no evidence of a linear increase in the degree of partisanship in economic approval over the period with available data (see Table 1). Yet, looking president by president, we do see a statistically significant increase in the correlation between party identification and economic approval during the Bush 43 years (see Table 3). Compared to the correlation during the Bush 41 presidency, the correlation during the younger Bush administration was about .15 higher (p < .10). Although just short of statistical
significant at conventional levels, the correlation during the Reagan era was estimated to be
about .14 higher than during the elder Bush administration (p = .12).

[Figure 4 about here]

The story is even clearer for foreign affairs approval. As Figure 5 shows, these
assessments have become more partisan over time, suggesting that politics currently do not “stop
at the water’s edge.” As we can see in Table 1, the time trend just misses statistical significance
at conventional levels (p = .11), but Table 3 demonstrates some significant change over time.
Again, the comparison category is the elder Bush presidency. Compared to this period, the
correlation between partisanship and foreign relations approval was .23 points higher during the
Bush 43 years, again the most polarized period. Partisanship was also high during Reagan’s
presidency, when the party correlation was .12 points higher than during the elder Bush
administration. Once again, we see that views became less partisan in 2008, when the
correlation dropped to .53.

[Figure 5 about here]

It is natural to assume that inpartisans would view the president as being closer to
themselves ideologically than outpartisans would; conservative Republicans would see Ronald
Reagan or George W. Bush as closer to their own ideological conservatism than liberal
Democrats would. Figure 6 charts the average absolute distance between respondents’
placement of themselves on the standard 7-point ideology scale (ranging from “extremely
conservative” to “extremely liberal”) and their placement of the president on the same scale from
1972 to 2004 (respondents were not asked to place the president on the scale in 2006 or 2008).
From 1972-2004, the perceived distance from the president for inpartisans remained largely the
same, hovering between 1 and 1.5 points. Unsurprisingly, outpartisans always felt more
ideologically removed from the president than inpartisans. However, on average, outpartisans’ perceived distance from the president has grown from approximately 2 points in 1972 to approximately 3 points on the 7-point scale in 2004. Thus, the average partisan gap in perceived ideological distance from the president has grown from about 1 point to about 2 points, roughly doubling over the period of study, a statistically significant increase (see Table 1). Table 3 shows that, compared to the estimated gap in perceived ideological distance in 1972, the party gap increased by about half a point during the Reagan presidency and almost a full point during the Clinton and Bush 43 administrations. In practical terms, outpartisans’ perception of greater ideological distance from the president means they may well feel more and more alienated from the president. This sense of ideological distance may also raise the stakes in the president’s efforts to effect various policy changes.

[Figure 6 about here]

Finally, partisanship also affects assessments of the president’s personal traits, namely competence and morality. With a few exceptions, since 1980, the ANES has asked how well various traits describe the president. Some of these traits tap general views of the president’s integrity and competence (see Kinder 1986; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Funk 1999; Greene 2001; Newman 2003), which are strongly related to presidential approval (Kinder 1986; Greene 2001; Newman 2003). Although the specific items included in each study vary over time, each study included the traits “provides strong leadership,” “knowledgeable,” and “moral” (except 1982, 1986, 1990, 2006, when no trait items were included). Scholars typically argue the first two items relate to views of the president’s competence, so we average views on these two traits as a measure of competence and take views of the president’s morality on their own.
Figure 7 graphs the correlation between party identification and assessments of the president’s morality. The linear trend is positive and statistically significant at the .10 level (see Table 1), pointing to a tighter relationship between partisanship and views of presidents’ morality over time. As Table 3 shows, compared to 1980, the correlation between partisanship and assessments of the president’s morality were .25 and .29 points higher during the Clinton and Bush 43 presidencies, respectively. The correlation was about .20 points higher during Reagan’s tenure as well (p = .104).

[Figure 7 about here]

The trend is less stark for assessments of the president’s competence, but there is still some evidence of increasing polarization (see Figure 8). The linear trend is not terribly far from conventional levels of statistical significance (p = .17). Similar to what we have seen before, competence assessments were near their lowest partisan ebb in 2008. If we exclude 2008, the trend is significant at the .05 level (data not shown). Once again, we see a general increase in partisanship, with 2008 being an exception. Table 3 shows no statistically significant differences across presidencies, though once again, if we exclude 2008, the correlation during the Bush 43 presidency is an estimated .19 points higher than in 1980 and reaches statistical significance at the .05 level (data not shown). In sum, partisanship increasingly colors several factors that shape presidential approval.

[Figure 8 about here]

**Accounting for the Partisan Gap in Presidential Approval**

Although a comprehensive explanation of the extent and variation of polarization in approval is well beyond the scope of this study, we offer some initial analyses that point to potential sources of change in polarization of presidential approval. Throughout our analysis, we
noted that 2008 was an exception to the general trend of increasing polarization. The recurring theme highlights an important point: when conditions are overwhelmingly positive polarization will decline as even outpartisans approve in greater numbers. Likewise, during undeniably negative conditions, more inpartisans will join outpartisans in disapproval, again attenuating polarization. In a similar way, major events (often called “rally ‘round the flag” events), known to affect approval ratings (e.g., Mueller 1973; MacKuen 1983; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Brody 1991; Brace and Hinckley 1992), might be pushing outpartisans to approve. After all, part of the rally effect consists of outpartisans shifting from disapproval to approval (e.g., Edwards and Swenson 1997).

To evaluate whether these two forces shape variation in the party gap in approval, we first estimated a baseline of the degree to which polarization is increasing. We do this via a simple OLS model of the party gap as a function of the linear time counter we employed above, but omitting 1974 since assessments of the economy were not included in the 1974 study. As Table 4, column 1 shows, from study to study, the party gap is estimated to increase by 0.9 points, a statistically significant estimate (the results are different than those in Table 1 column 1 because we exclude 1974 here). In column 4, we take the president by president approach and compare the party gap to that of the 1970s. The results show that the party gap during Reagan’s presidency was about 15 points greater, during Clinton’s tenure about 12 points higher, and during George W. Bush’s presidency almost 20 points higher than during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter presidencies.

[Table 4 about here]

Next, as a measure of the degree to which views of the economy were exceptionally positive or negative, we use the average retrospective assessments of national economic
conditions for each study (ranging from -1, meaning conditions have gotten worse to 1, conditions have gotten better, with 0 meaning no change). Recall that either especially good or bad conditions will suppress polarization, so we calculated the absolute difference between the average economic assessment from each individual study and the grand average from the 18 studies. Thus, years with roughly average retrospective views of economic conditions have a value near 0, while years with extremely negative or positive views compared to other years will have higher values. Since more extreme conditions should suppress the party gap, we expect a negative sign.

To identify rally events, we examined various studies of presidential approval (e.g., Ostrom and Simon 1985; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Brace and Hinckley 1992; Clarke and Stewart 1994; Nadeau, et al. 1999; Newman 2002; Gronke and Brehm 2002; Lebo and Cassino 2007) and included events that occurred in August or later in a particular year and were included in all the studies examined. We coded our events variable 1 for years in which there was a rally event and 0 otherwise. Since we are hypothesizing that rally events should attenuate the party gap, we expect a negative sign.

As column 2 of Table 4 shows, both of these variables are strongly related to the degree of party polarization in approval (p < .01 for both). Extreme views of the economy, whether positive or negative, shrink the party gap in approval. The variable ranges from .03 (the year closest to the overall average) to .67 (in 2008, when the average assessment was a dismal - .86), meaning that over the period of study, the variable affected the party gap by up to almost 15 points. Rally events also decrease the party gap, on average by about 13 points. Column 5 shows similar results when taking a president by president approach.
We speculated above that the Iraq War probably heightened polarization in Bush’s approval (see Jacobson 2008). To gauge the extent of the effect, we included a dummy variable equaling 1 in 2004 and 0 all other years. Table 4, Column 3 estimates that the war added about 8 points to the gap, though the estimate is far from statistical significance. Column 6, however, estimates a statistically significant (at the .10 level) boost in the gap of over 13 points.

These results suggest that one of the reasons party polarization has increased since the 1970s relates to conditions that are prone to polarization: comparatively few years with extreme economic conditions and fewer rally events. As Figure 9 shows, during the Reagan and Bush 43 presidencies, the presidents with the greatest party polarization in approval, overall views of the economy were relatively close to average, allowing for greater polarization in these views. This is especially true if we exclude 2008. Since extremely positive or negative assessments of the economy will attenuate polarization, the lack of such assessments for the greater part of these presidencies accounts for some of the party gap during those years, while more extreme views of the economy during the elder Bush’s presidency limited polarization. In addition, most of the rally events occurred fairly early in the period of study, meaning most of the later years did not include the polarization suppressing rally effect. Add to this the polarizing Iraq War and we see some of the roots of the increase in polarization.

[Figure 9 about here]

That said, whether we estimate a linear time trend or take the president by president approach, significant variation in the party gap remains even after we control for rally events and especially positive or negative views of the economy. Comparing columns 2 and 3 to column 1 shows that controlling for these effects only barely shrinks the coefficient for the time trend. The presidency by presidency approach suggests that these two variables help to explain polarization
at some points more than others. In column 5, once we control for these factors, the party gap for Reagan is only 12 points above 1970s levels, rather than 15 in column 4. Interestingly, controlling for these factors actually increases the estimated party gap for the elder Bush from 7 points to 12, pushing the party gap during this period to statistically significant levels for the first time in our analysis. Controlling for the two variables makes virtually no difference for the party gap under Clinton’s leadership. In contrast, these controls shrink the estimated party gap during the Bush 43 years the most, by almost 5 points, and adding the control for the Iraq War shrinks the gap another 3 points. However, even with these controls, the party gap remains roughly 12 points greater during the Bush administration than in the 1970s.

What accounts for the remaining variation in party polarization and in particular the trend toward greater polarization? It is beyond the scope of our data to answer this question. Surely some of the explanation stems from increasing polarization in variables known to affect approval (views of the economy, the president’s handling of the economy and foreign relations, the president’s personal character, etc.). In fact, if we control for the factors we have shown to be increasingly polarized, the party gap typically shrinks by about 30 points (data not shown). However, the present data cannot help us to understand why those factors have become polarized or help us to untangle the degree to which polarization in these assessments is cause or consequence of the growing party gap in overall approval. These are important questions for future research.

Various writers have suggested several potential explanations for increasing polarization in the public, including the fragmenting media market and the subsequent polarization of media coverage (e.g., Mutz 2006; Prior 2007), politicians’ and commentators’ electoral and profit incentives to employ these new media outlets to stake out increasingly polarized positions and
demonize opponents (e.g., Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006), and the closer alignment between religion and politics (e.g., Dionne 2006; Kohut 2006). So far as we know, no one has examined the degree to which these factors account for partisan polarization in the specific domain of presidential approval. Our results suggest that efforts to do so should take into account the role of rally events and relatively bleak or rosy views of the economy.

Conclusion

What have we learned? The collection of surveys dating back to the Nixon administration suggests that partisan polarization in views of the president has increased, leading inpartisans to be ever more likely to approve and outpartisans to be ever more likely to disapprove. Jacobson (2008) demonstrated that polarization was significant during the Bush 43 presidency. Adding historical context shows that that under George W. Bush’s leadership, polarization reached historic highs. Bond and Fleisher (2001) showed a trend in polarization from 1972 to 2000. Adding the Bush 43 years demonstrates that polarization continued to increase in dramatic ways, but that increase is neither constant nor inevitable. In addition, we have seen that this partisan gap has not just grown; it has grown stronger and more entrenched. Inpartisans are increasingly strongly approving and outpartisans strongly disapproving of the president. Moderate views are in shorter and shorter supply among partisans.

Moreover, partisanship increasingly colors perceptions of various facets of the presidency, indirectly affecting approval. Bond and Fleisher (2001) showed that perceptions of the national economy may have become more polarized over time. Apart from the George W. Bush presidency, the evidence is limited. Adding the Bush presidency provides a clear, statistically significant trend toward increasing polarization. In addition, it is not just views of economic conditions that have polarized, but also public views of several aspects of the
presidency. Increasingly, inpartisans see most aspects of the president’s performance favorably and outpartisans see most of them unfavorably. This is significant because polarized evaluations of the presidency may now be more rigid and fixed, providing presidents with limited opportunities to sway outpartisans.

Finally, we have seen that polarization has not increased constantly. The George H. W. Bush presidency interrupted the growth of partisanship seen during the Reagan years and at points even during the George W. Bush presidency we saw some reversals of the trends toward polarization. Our analysis of the party gap in approval suggests that especially positive and negative views of the economy and rally events can alter the degree of polarization. Thus, polarization is not inexorable. However, the fact that we point to such historic times as the worst recession since the 1930s for hints of recent bipartisanship suggests that only cataclysmic external forces can limit partisan polarization in views of the president in the current context.

The Barack Obama presidency will serve as a crucial case study in seeing whether polarization will continue. Campaigning strongly on the promise of bipartisanship and making strong (if unsuccessful) early overtures to Congressional Republicans, Obama may turn the tide against public polarization. So far, however, this appears not to be the case. Obama’s approval among Democrats has hovered around 90% through early April, 2009, while Republican approval has declined from 41 to 27%. An April 7, 2009, Gallup report notes “to this point, the typical partisan gap for Barack Obama has been 61 points. This puts him much more in line with the recent [George W.] Bush record than with earlier presidents” (Jones 2009).

Increasing polarization may affect Obama and future presidents’ governing choices. Because many Republicans are likely to disapprove strongly of Obama no matter what he does, he may have an incentive to continue to focus his appeals on his liberal base, seeking approval
from Democratic partisans rather than country at large. Should Obama, sensing the impossibility of gaining approval from Republicans, take this route, the polarization we have seen growing in the recent past will likely persist.

Furthermore, polarization in the public may limit Obama’s ability to bargain with congressional Republicans, whose own constituents may so disapprove of Obama that bargaining with him may prove politically disastrous for them. Many Republicans in congress will be able to score bigger points at home by vigorously and loudly opposing Obama than by compromising with him. It may be that Democratic partisans will want to see Obama pass his agenda without catering to Republican interests, and Republican partisans will prefer to see their representatives obstruct and stall rather than do anything which might give Obama credit. Instead of working constructively with the Congress, Obama may be forced to rely more and more on going public, a strategy that is rarely successful (Edwards 2003). To the extent that polarization creates incentives to avoid bargaining in favor of going public, polarization may be pushing presidents toward failure.

Clearly then, increasingly polarized views of the president may be harmful. The failure of the chief executive, partisan gridlock in Congress, and increasing distaste for fellow citizens of different partisan persuasions are all potential consequences of such polarization. Reversing the trend of the past thirty years will be difficult, particularly as few of today’s politicians have strong incentives to make such an attempt. The Obama administration’s apparent attempt to do so will prove an interesting case study, but early results point to a longstanding polarization.
References


Figure 1: Partisan Gap in Approval

Regression Trendline

Trendline 95% Confidence Interval
Upper Bound

Trendline 95% Confidence Interval
Lower Bound

Note: Strength in approval ranges from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 3 (strongly approve). The line denotes the difference between average inpartisan approval and average outpartisan approval. Data are from the American National Election Studies.
Figure 4: Partisanship and Economic Approval

Correlation: Party ID and Economic Approval

Figure 5: Increasingly Partisan Foreign Relations Approval
Figure 6: Increasingly Partisan Perceived Ideological Distance

Average Perceived Distance

- Inpartisans
- Outpartisans

Figure 7: Increasingly Partisan Views of Presidents' Morality
Figure 8: Increasingly Partisan Views of Presidents' Competence

Correlation: Party ID and Views of Competence

Figure 9: Extremity in Retrospective Assessments
Table 1: Polarization over Time, 1972 to 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Approval 1972-2008</th>
<th>Approval 1972-2000</th>
<th>Strength of Approval</th>
<th>Retrospective Economy Approval</th>
<th>Economic Approval</th>
<th>Foreign Relations Approval</th>
<th>Perceived Ideological Distance from President</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Counter</td>
<td>1.06** (0.38)</td>
<td>0.94+ (0.52)</td>
<td>0.016 (0.014)</td>
<td>0.007+ (0.004)</td>
<td>0.002 (0.008)</td>
<td>0.016 (0.009)</td>
<td>0.07** (0.01)</td>
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<td>1.11** (0.18)</td>
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</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; + significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

Dependent variables listed as column headings. Approval refers to the party gap in approval (% inpartisans approve - % outpartisans approve). Strength of approval refers to the average inpartisan approval (0 to 3) minus average outpartisan approval (0 to 3). Retrospective economy, economic approval, foreign relations approval, competence, and morality refer to the correlation between party identification and the relevant variable. Perceived ideological distance from president refers to the average distance between outpartisans’ placements of themselves and the president on the 7 point ideology scale minus the average distance for inpartisans. Time counter takes on value of 1 in 1972, increases by one each subsequent study. The number of observations varies because variables were not included in all years.

Table 2: Partisan Polarization in Approval Across Presidencies

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Approval</th>
<th>Strength of Approval</th>
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<td>(3)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.48+</td>
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<td>Carter</td>
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<td>10.91</td>
<td>0.23</td>
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<td>Reagan</td>
<td>17.41</td>
<td>15.77*</td>
<td>0.54*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.96)</td>
<td>(5.54)</td>
<td>(0.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. H. W. Bush</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td>7.21</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(10.91)</td>
<td>(6.91)</td>
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<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
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<td>(5.54)</td>
<td>(0.23)</td>
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<td>G. W. Bush</td>
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Dependent variables listed as column headings. The number of observations varies because variables were not included in all years. Approval refers to the party gap in approval (% inpartisans approve - % outpartisans approve). Strength of approval refers to the average inpartisan approval (0 to 3) minus average outpartisan approval (0 to 3). Comparison (omitted) category is Nixon (1972) in column 1, 1972-1980 in column 2, and Carter (1980) in column 3. Data: American National Election Studies 1972-2008.
Table 3: Partisan Polarization in Other Variables Across Presidencies

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Retrospective Economy</th>
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<th>Foreign Relations Approval</th>
<th>Foreign Ideological Distance from President</th>
<th>Competence</th>
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Note: Standard errors in parentheses; + significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%
Dependent variables listed as column headings. Retrospective economy, economic approval, foreign relations approval, competence, and morality refer to the correlation between party identification and the relevant variable. Perceived ideological distance from president refers to the average distance between outpartisans’ placements of themselves and the president on the 7 point ideology scale minus the average distance for inpartisans. Comparison (omitted) category is Nixon (1972) for columns 1 and 4, Bush 41 (1990 and 1992) for columns 2 and 3, and 1980 for columns 5 and 6. The number of observations varies because variables were not included in all years. Data: American National Election Studies 1972-2008.

Table 4: Accounting for the Party Gap in Approval, 1972-2008

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<td>(4.47)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; + significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%
Dependent variable is the % inpartisans approving - % outpartisans approving for each study.
Comparison (omitted) category for columns 4-6 is 1972 to 1980.
Notes

1 We thank Jeffrey Cohen and Costas Panagopoulos for their helpful suggestions.

2 Between 1972 and 1980, respondents were asked about the state of business conditions rather than the national economy. Bond and Fleisher (2001) included the business conditions items until 1982, a strategy we follow here.

3 For 2006, we use the ANES 2006 Pilot Study.

4 Although the trend is not as strong, we find similar an upward, but not statistically significant time trend for prospective evaluations of the national economy (not shown for space constraints). Following Bond and Fleisher (2001), we present Tau-b correlations.

5 Question wording: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the current president] is handling the economy?”

6 Question wording: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the current president] is handling our relations with foreign countries?”


8 We also tested whether especially favorable or unfavorable objective indicators of economic conditions (e.g., the misery index) were related to the party gap in approval. They were not, suggesting that views of economic conditions are colored by more than objective economic conditions (see also Nadeau, et al. 1999). Future research should continue to search
for explanations for the gap between objective indicators and public views of the economy and the (probably related) ways those views have become increasingly polarized.

9 We recognize the rudimentary nature of our time series analysis. In part, this is a function of having 19 or fewer periods in our series. We estimated various time series models (e.g., including a lagged dependent variable and various ARIMA specifications) and found similar results.