

THE CULTURE WARS & POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN PERSPECTIVE:

WHY POLARIZATION AND ITS PERTURBATIONS ARE A

PERSISTANT PUZZLE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Political polarization in the American electorate has received a great deal of attention in recent years with most of the research focusing on social issues and their impact on electoral outcomes. However, scant attention has been paid to polarization on other issue dimensions and the mass-elite affects on polarization. I develop several empirical measures of political polarization: variance to assess the spread of opinion and kurtosis as a measure of bimodality. I assess polarization using ANES and GSS cumulative data from 1970 – 2008 on several prominent social issues such as abortion, women's equality, affirmative action, and non-social issues such as government jobs programs and defense spending. I examine public opinion polarization as well as the relationship between mass public opinion and elite public opinion using D-W nominate scores as a measure of elite opinion. I find there is significant polarization of social and non-social policy opinion, both in terms of the average public-preferred level of government action in these areas and the conflict over it. Contrary to the consensus in the literature, I find that elite opinion is responsive to mass opinion and that there is a recursive relationship between mass and elite ideology.