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Why Washington Won't Work

Polarization, Political Trust, and the Governing Crisis

MARC J. HETHERINGTON
THOMAS J. RUDOLPH

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CHICAGO AND LONDON

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Rudolph has also accumulated a number of personal debts over the years. His parents, Dr. and Mrs. James T. Rudolph, both of whom worked as educators, provided a supportive environment that encouraged intellectual curiosity. A special debt is owed to Dr. Erwin P. Rudolph, Rudolph's grandfather and professor emeritus from Wheaton College. A retired professor of medieval English, Erwin has been a wonderful role model and example of what living the life of the mind should be like. Although nearing his ninety-ninth birthday at the time of this writing, he remains intellectually curious and has followed this book's development with great interest.

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Extreme Leaders Don't Listen to a Moderate Public

We face more than a deficit of dollars right now. We face a deficit of trust—deep and pervasive doubts about how Washington works that have been growing for years. —Barack Obama, 2010 State of the Union Address

American politics is dysfunctional. With no ideological overlap between the parties and moderates going the way of the dino (e.g., Theriault 2008), cross-party compromises on important matters increasingly rare. Unlike congressional representatives, American senators are moderate, if ideological at all (e.g., Fiorina, Abrams, and P 2005). Why, then, do citizens continue to allow their representatives to run such a poor job representing them? That is what this book is about. endeavor to explain why the public has become an inert force in American politics. The short answer is that partisans whose party is out of power have almost no trust at all in a government run by the other side. This striking departure from the past. Absent this supply of trust, public consensus on issues rarely forms. Lawmakers, in turn, feel little pressure from their constituents to rise above their basest partisan instincts. Ultimately little gets done, but partisans blame only the other side for the lack of productivity.

Recent events tell the story. While polarization in Washington has been high, congressional productivity has been low. The 112th and 113th Congresses, which served from 2011 to 2014, were the least productive since scholars began to measure congressional productivity in the 1950s (Binder 2014; Terkel 2012). Mark Twain aphorisms notwithstanding, productive political institutions can be costly. Since 1917, Congress has agreed nearly one hundred times, mostly with

incident, to increase the country's ability to borrow money for obligations already incurred. In the 2010s, however, the routine became anything but. With Republicans ascendant after sweeping midterm victories in 2010 and congressional parties as polarized as any time in the last one hundred years, Congress and the president repeatedly failed to reach an agreement on raising the debt ceiling. As a result, one of the three major credit rating agencies downgraded US debt, a stunning and—to that point—unthinkable outcome.

Over the next two years, these partisan clashes continued, with an increasing price tag to the American public. First came the sequestration of \$85.4 billion during the 2013 fiscal year. Sequestration included a mandatory 7.9 percent cut in the defense budget, a 5.3 percent cut in discretionary domestic spending, and a 2 percent cut in Medicare.¹ These across-the-board cuts, especially damaging during fragile economic times, were actually designed the year before to be so odious that the prospect of implementing them would force Republicans and Democrats to compromise on spending cuts and revenue increases. Yet in the polarized environment inside the Beltway, compromise never emerged, and an economically injurious policy was enacted by default. In the fall of 2013, partisan brinkmanship over funding Obamacare, the federal budget, and the need to again increase the debt ceiling led to a sixteen-day government shutdown, the first in seventeen years. Its economic costs were high. Standard and Poor's estimated that the shutdown cost the economy about \$24 billion, reducing projections for gross domestic product (GDP) growth from 3 percent to 2.4 percent.² The Council of Economic Advisors estimated that the shutdown cost about 120,000 jobs as well. Although Congress eventually did agree on a debt limit increase just hours before the country would have defaulted, political dysfunction carried tangible costs.

Ideologically committed congressional representatives are unlikely to depolarize on their own because they strongly believe that their approach is correct. Indeed, that is probably why most sought office in the first place (Aldrich 1995; Cohen et al. 2008). Furthermore, the minority party has strong incentives not to compromise when party margins in Congress are close (Lee 2009). What is puzzling is why the American public has sat idly by as the congressional parties, particularly the Republicans, have lurched toward ideological extremes. The electorate is uniquely positioned to force representatives toward the political center. Representatives need public support at election time, so they have incentives to listen to public opinion, particularly when the public is angry. And the public

has been angry: congressional approval has registered consistently below 25 percent since 2010 and plummeted to 9 percent at the end of 2013. Yet the public has done little to rein in ideological and partisan excess in Washington. Although the public's quiescence could be evidence that it is just as thirsty for ideological combat as members of Congress, public opinion surveys have repeatedly shown that the *policy preferences* of ordinary Americans, unlike those of Congress, are not particularly extreme (Florina et al. 2005; Clinton 2006; Batumi and Herron 2010). This is a puzzle.

Why, then, do American citizens put up with—even reward—such excess? We argue that ordinary Americans are, in fact, increasingly polarized, just not in their policy preferences or ideology.⁴ Instead, we focus on the fact that partisans are now polarized in their feelings about political opponents. Republicans and Democrats simply do not like each other to an unprecedented degree.

As an example of what we mean by a polarization of feelings, consider the response when, in September 2009, the Obama administration announced that the president would mark the new school year by giving a speech to students to challenge them “to work hard, set educational goals, and take responsibility for their learning” (Obama 2009). Why people think about “hot button” issues that deeply divide Americans neither education nor hard work is usually among them. Furthermore, the Department of Education spokeswoman made clear that the speech was not a policy address; its viewing would be entirely voluntary, with each individual school making a decision on whether to broadcast the speech during school hours.⁵ The ensuing furor must have taken the administration by surprise. It is perhaps not a shock that Republican officials told the president to task because that is, arguably, their job. For example, president of the Florida Republican Party, Jim Greer, wrote a letter in which he charged that “President Obama has turned to American’s children to spread his liberal lies, indoctrinating American’s [sic] youngest children before they have a chance to decide for themselves” (Greer 2009).

But it was not only political leaders who had strong feelings at the president’s speech; ordinary Americans did, too. Angry phone calls and letters poured into superintendents’ offices across the country, and parents threatening to keep their children home from school if Obama’s address was aired. One Colorado parent, in tears, told CNN, “Think about my kids . . . sorry . . . in school having to listen to that just re

upsets me. I'm an American. They are Americans, and I don't feel that's OK. I feel very scared to be in this country with our leadership right now."⁶ If this Colorado woman felt this strongly about her child simply being exposed to a video recording of a Democrat, we suspect she is going to place little pressure on her favored party leaders to compromise with that Democrat regardless of the issue.

It is important to note that negative feelings have not always run so deep. When, on September 8, President Obama made his speech, urging students to take responsibility for their education, no matter their circumstances, and to "get serious this year . . . put your best effort into everything you do," many school districts, overwhelmed by parental complaints, opted not to share it.⁷ When George H. W. Bush addressed public school students in a similar fashion in 1991, however, it did not cause a stir.⁸

Americans' strong, negative feelings about their political opponents have led to another, even more consequential, development in public opinion: the polarization of political trust. Political trust is critical because it helps create consensus in the mass public by providing a bridge between the governing party's policy ideas and the opinions of those who usually support the other party. Consensus is important because research tells us that policy makers respond to the wishes of the public when consensus develops (see, for example, Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987). When both Republicans and Democrats (or liberals and conservatives) in the electorate support an item on the policy agenda, Congress and the president usually respond with laws.⁹

We show again and again in this book that the recent polarization of political trust stands in the way of the emergence of public consensus on public policy. The reason is simple: people who distrust government are unwilling to make what we call "ideological sacrifices." For a conservative citizen to go along with a liberal policy idea like health care reform, for example, it requires him or her to sacrifice his or her general principles that smaller government is better government. For a liberal citizen to go along with a conservative policy idea like privatizing Social Security, it requires him or her to sacrifice his or her general principles that big government in this realm works. Those who trust government are apt to make ideological sacrifices. Those who distrust the government are not. Strong dislike and deep distrust of the governing party means that partisans from the out party in the electorate will not nudge their representatives toward compromises with the governing party.

To illustrate our thinking about trust and sacrifices, consider the following. Suppose that Harry and Louise, a newly married couple, wish to

adopt a pet for their new home. Since they only have enough room one, they must agree on which type. Louise is the proverbial "cat person. She grew up in an apartment with cats and assures Harry that they a number of desirable qualities. Cats, she argues, are intelligent, independent, low maintenance, and keep rodents away. In short, Louise is disposed to see the virtues of cat ownership. Harry, by contrast, is a "person." His family had a dog when he was a child. Dogs make better he believes, because they are affectionate, playful, loyal, and protect. For Harry to agree to adopt a cat rather than a dog, he must be willing sacrifice his own pet preferences. The same is true for Louise to go a with a dog adoption. If neither agrees to sacrifice, however, consensus not develop, no adoption will occur, and there will be yet another lo pet in the world. Both Harry and Louise are more likely to make sacrifice if they trust their partner's vision of what the future might h If they question this vision, or question each other's motives, they will yield. And, in turn, they will not adopt.

Pet preferences are like ideological preferences. They may be strong held, yet, under the right circumstances and with enough trust in one's goitating partner, people can be persuaded to sacrifice them. As the loving chapters will demonstrate, trust is most necessary to conservat when asked to support a liberal policy initiative or to liberals when as to support a conservative one. In both cases, political trust, if it exists, the potential to dampen ideological conflict and forge policy consen Its absence ensures dissensus.

Considered in this way, trust can serve as a reservoir that policy makers draw on to cause those not ideologically predisposed to follow then give their ideas a shot.¹⁰ That reservoir has run dry. As evidence, consider the following data. In 2010, we asked one thousand respondents a version of a trust-in-government question that has been asked by survey organizations since the 1950s. Our question read, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or never. During the first fifty years that survey researchers have asked this question, Republicans and Democrats have rarely differed by much. Democrats expressed a few percentage points more trust than Republicans, under a Democratic president and Republicans expressed a few percentage points more trust than Democrats did under a Republican president (Hetherington 2005).

That tendency toward slight partisan differences has changed fundamentally of late. In figure 1.1, we have broken down the distribution

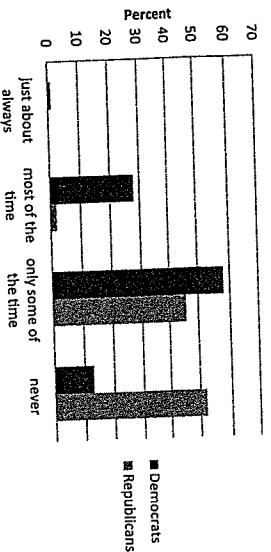


FIGURE 1.1. Trust in government by party, 2010

Source: CCES, 2010, Vanderbilt Module.

responses to our 2010 survey by party identification. The findings are remarkable. A stunning 52 percent of Republicans reported that they “never” trusted the government in Washington to do what is right. Another 46 percent said they trusted it “only some of the time.” A vanishingly small 2 percent reported trusting the government “most of the time,” and not one Republican identifier said he or she trusted government “just about always.” If we are correct that trusting, out-party partisans are the bridge to overcoming partisan gridlock, these results make clear that the bridge has washed away. The absence of trust among Republicans all but eliminates the development of public consensus. Instead, Republicans in the electorate will do what comes naturally: follow the cues of Republicans in Washington and oppose everything that Democrats propose. Without consensus, public opinion will not nudge representatives toward moderation and compromise. Instead, the public will reinforce polarization in Washington. In short, the polarization of political trust has rendered an ideologically moderate (or perhaps nonideological) mass public an inert force in overcoming polarization in Washington. Without public trust in government, the lawmaking process in Washington has ground to a halt.

A Tale of Two First Terms

Contrasting the beginning of George W. Bush’s presidency with the beginning of Barack Obama’s helps illustrate the central importance of political trust to policy outcomes. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, political trust surged to levels not seen since the 1960s. In the month before the attacks, only 30 percent of Americans said they trusted the government to do what

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was right either “almost always” or “most of the time.” Just a month later 64 percent did. This reading was twenty points higher than any taken the twenty-five years prior to the attacks. With trust remaining relatively high through his first term, Bush usually got what he wanted despite relatively narrow congressional majorities. For example, trust in government was important to securing public support for restrictions on civil liberties like the PATRIOT Act and other domestic security enhancements (Dolan and Silver 2004) along with, as we show in this book, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (see also Hetherington and Husser 2012).

Two things are important to understand here. First, political trust was very high during the early Bush years—stratospherically so right after 9/11. A key reason, which we detail in this book, is that politics was consumed by foreign affairs and war. Despite the fact that Americans often express little trust in the government as a whole, they actually like a trust certain parts of it. For example, almost everyone these days likes the military, which is part of the government, too. As a result, trust tends to be higher when foreign policy is salient and lower when more partisan domestic concerns that make use of less popular parts of the government are salient. When people evaluate the government’s trustworthiness, the evaluation bears the imprint of the part of the government that is on their minds when they are asked about it.

The second thing that is important to understand is that, especially in 2002 and 2003, political trust had not yet polarized by party. With the focus on keeping the country safe from terror and fighting the popular part of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Democrats were very likely to say they trusted the government, too. For example, in 2002, 63 percent of Republicans and 49 percent of Democrats said they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right at least “most of the time.” Historical speaking, these percentages are extremely high. As a result, broad public consensus existed for early Bush era policy changes. Many Democrats in Congress, some of whom had misgivings about the challenges to civil liberties embedded in the PATRIOT Act, felt they needed to support it because their constituents did. Although people can debate the merits of the PATRIOT Act, the critical fact here is that consensus in public opinion helped nudge Congress, including some of its recalcitrant members and the president toward policy change.

What a difference six or seven years can make. During the first year of Barack Obama’s presidency, trust reached, by far, its nadir since surveys organizations first started asking about it in the 1950s, with only 9 percent expressing trust in an October 2011 *New York Times* poll. The reasons for

the drop were numerous. Most important, the central task of governing changed relative to most of the Bush years. No longer was government mostly working on consensual matters, such as keeping Americans safe from terrorists and taking the fight to them. Instead, government was dealing with a financial crisis more severe than any since the Great Depression. Unemployment and budget deficits were high, the stock market and economic optimism were low, and Americans were unhappy. When people perceive performance to be poor, trust in government evaporates (Citrin and Green 1986). Moreover, party leaders did not pull together as they often do when facing a crisis. Perhaps because the crisis was economic and not foreign, the public was treated to a lot of angry sniping between Republicans and Democrats in Washington. Finally, Americans had even grown weary of the things that tended to unify them. Specifically, people increasingly questioned whether the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were worth the cost.

With political trust lower than ever before, Obama's experience starkly demonstrates how profoundly low trust can affect policy support. Programs that started out as very popular with the public, such as health care reform, economic stimulus, and financial industry regulation, quickly became political lightning rods. Only bruising and seldom-used legislative tactics ensured their passage. In the end, legislators received no leeway from constituents for their efforts to stanch the bleeding from the financial crisis. Massive midterm losses for the majority Democrats ensued in 2010, even though most experts agreed that the roots of the calamity were to be found in the policies of George W. Bush and Republican congressional majorities in the early 2000s. In the Tea Party, low trust spawned a virulently antigovernment political movement. After the midterm elections, government time and again teetered on the brink of shutdown. In the view of many commentators, the nation's political institutions became all but ungovernable.

The contrasting experiences of Bush and Obama are amplified examples of a general trend: trust is notably higher during Republican administrations. The American National Election Study (ANES) has regularly asked a question to tap how "much people trust the government in Washington to do what is right" since 1964. Americans can choose between three categories: "just about always," "most of the time," and "only some of the time." In figure 1.2, we graph the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who report trusting the government either just about always or most of the time (see also Haidt and Hetherington 2012). To simplify

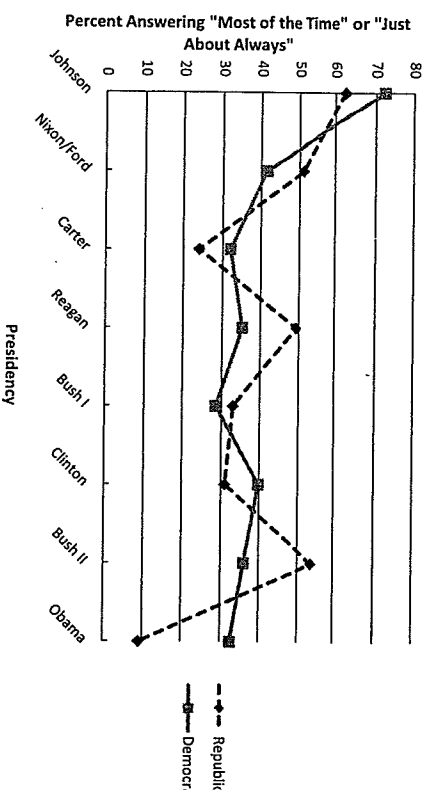


FIGURE 1.2. Partisan differences in trust in government by presidential administration
Sources: American National Election Study, 2011; Cumulative Data File; CCES, 2006; American National Election Study, 2012.

its presentation, we group together all the ANES surveys that were taken under a given president.¹¹ For example, trust in government during the Clinton years is the average score from the surveys taken in 1994, 1998, and 2000. For George W. Bush, it is the average score from surveys taken in 2002, 2004, and 2008 (no ANES survey was administered in 2006). The results are striking. Democrats have not varied all that much how much they report trusting government. Since the 1970s, the percentage of trusting Democrats has fluctuated between 30 percent and 40 percent, regardless of the president's party. Most of the change over time has been in Republicans' trust in government. These data explode or myth right away: it is not true that Republicans do not trust government. In fact, they trust it quite a lot when one of their own occupies the White House. What Republicans do not trust is government headed by Democrats. This is the key reason that trust is higher during Republican presidencies. Democrats trust government during Democratic and Republican presidencies at basically the same rate, whereas Republicans trust it much more when their party is in power.

It is the people who trust government but who identify with the party opposite the president who are the key to our story of political dysfunction. They decide whether or not public consensus develops, which, in turn, can push policy makers toward action. On most (but not all) issue presidents and other party elites can convince their own party faithful i

the electorate to support their positions. Consensus requires significant buy-in from independents and partisans of the opposite party. It is *trusting* out-party partisans who are most likely to provide such a bridge. They are the most willing to make the ideological sacrifice necessary for consensus to develop (Rudolph and Popp 2009).

Considered through this lens, the data in figure 1.2 suggest that, historically, between 30 percent and 40 percent of Democrats have been willing to make ideological sacrifices insofar as that percentage of Democrats has tended to trust the government. Such relatively high levels of trust in government from the Nixon to early Bush years facilitated policy making for Republican presidents. Although Democratic presidents Carter and Clinton worked in a somewhat more difficult environment than their Republican counterparts, the percentages of trusting Republicans during their times in office were not nearly as vanishingly low as they were during Obama's presidency. Back then, consensus building across party lines in the electorate was still possible.

Lately, changes in the trust environment have made consensus building more complicated regardless of which party is in power. Figure 1.3 tells the story. Democrats' trust in government when run by a Republican president and Republican majorities in both houses of Congress was relatively high through 2004. Starting in 2005, however, Democrats' trust in government nosedived, though Republicans continued to trust it quite a lot, at least into 2006. In February 2005, for example, 55 percent of GOP identifiers reported that they trusted the government to do what is right at least "most of the time" even as the economy began to slow and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan trudged on. In contrast, only 21 percent of Democrats did—much lower than the historical norm for Democrats. Bush's agenda began to founder. It was at this point in his presidency that Bush failed to accomplish much of anything, with signature initiatives like Social Security privatization and comprehensive immigration reform dying in Congress. Low trust among Democrats was particularly germane to the failure of Social Security privatization (Rudolph and Popp 2009). With the percentage of potential ideological sacrificers among mass-level Democrats dwindling, there was little to push elite-level Democrats toward action.

When Barack Obama assumed the presidency with Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, Democratic partisans returned to their usual level of trust, with between 30 percent and 40 percent trusting the government in Washington to do what was right at least most of the time.

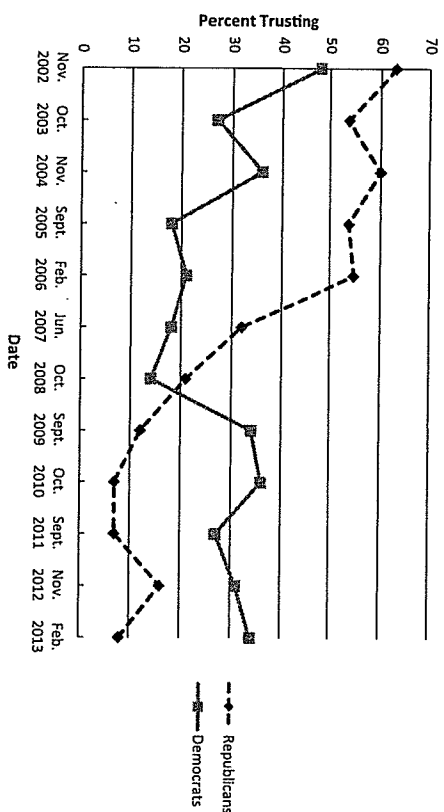


FIGURE 1.3. Political trust by partisanship, 2002–12

Trust among Republicans, however, reached unprecedentedly low levels. Consistent with the snapshot we showed in figure 1.1, political trust among Republicans during Obama's first term was often in the single digits. The near complete absence of Republicans who would be good candidates to make an ideological sacrifice during the period placed a brake on policy making that remains in place to this day. Although the situation has been particularly difficult for a Democratic president, readers will see throughout the book that an absence of government trust hampers Republican presidents just as it does Democratic ones, as George W. Bush learned in the last three years of his presidency. Chronically low levels of trust along with its polarization are central to the story of political dysfunction.

Plan of the Book

In the chapters that follow, we further explore this partisan polarization of trust and its costly consequences. We start in chapter 2 by defining our key terms: "polarization," "political trust," and "institutional responsiveness." Although we agree with Fiorina et al. (2005) and others that Americans' ideological predispositions and policy preferences are not polarized, we argue that this is not the only way that polarization might manifest itself in the public. We go on to show that Americans' feelings

about their opponents have, in fact, polarized. These polarized feelings are, in turn, central to why trust in government has polarized.

To understand why trust became polarized, we must first establish what causes it to change. In chapter 3, we employ time-series analysis to this end. Our results point to the central importance of issue salience. Trust is much higher when the public is focused on international rather than domestic problems. In addition, we find that since fewer people think the economy is important during good times than they do during bad times, good economies increase trust less than poor economies diminish it. Taken together, the results in chapter 3 imply that it is unlikely that political trust will ever return to 1960s levels for any length of time.

Although partisans of the governing party have always tended to trust government a little more than out-party partisans, the gap is very large today, with distrust of government among out-party partisans being nearly universal. In chapter 4, we use the lessons from chapter 3 as clues in our search for the causes of this recent polarization. We identify two key factors. First, we find that partisans' more negative feelings about the other party are central to the rise of polarized trust. Second, consistent with theories of motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000, 2013; Rudolph 2006; Taber and Lodge 2006), we find that partisans of different stripes perceive the political world increasingly differently depending on whether their party is in power. What's more, partisans now update their trust evaluations based on different criteria from each other, selectively focusing on information that favors their allies and disfavors their adversaries.

The next four chapters demonstrate the consequences of low and polarized trust. In chapter 5, we further leverage the importance of what parts of government become salient to people to demonstrate that the potential range of trust's effects is much wider than previously believed. Specifically, the *effects* of political trust on policy support depend on which issues are made salient to people before being asked how much they trust the government. In chapter 6, we further test our thinking by using survey data from a random cross section of Americans. With 9/11 serving as a natural experiment, we show that political trust did not affect attitudes about race-targeted programs in the years after the attack, as it usually does (Hetherington and Globetti 2002), but instead affected a range of foreign policies and national defense preferences that it had not affected before. Ironically, our results suggest that Republicans, the antigovernment party, appear to benefit from a deeper reservoir of trust-

based support when they are in office. We also begin to explore the important real-world implications of the *polarization* of trust. Specifically, we find that the gradual, then rapid, drop in trust among liberals during the middle-to-late Bush years is central to understanding why they stopped supporting the wars, ultimately turning Iraq into the most polarized conflict of the survey era (Jacobson 2006).

Although trust started to drop and polarize during the George W. Bush years, it would become still lower and more polarized during Barack Obama's presidency, with profound consequences. In chapter 7, we demonstrate that those who hope to use the machinery of government to jumpstart a reeling economy face an uphill climb. When the economy most needs stimulus (namely, when it is poor), trust in government tends to be low, which undermines support for running deficits and increasing government spending, particularly among conservatives. However, we find that low trust has no effect on support for using tax cuts as stimulus. To the extent that tax cuts have a less powerful effect than do spending increases in stimulating the economy, this knot of relationships appears to harm policy efficacy. In chapter 8, we establish the centrality of trust to explaining the ebb of public support for the Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare). Using a unique series of tracking polls, we demonstrate that declining support for health care reform resulted from three interrelated trends: the decline of political trust, the increase in people who thought health care reform would affect their families negatively, and a surge in conservative self-identification. Collectively, these trends combined to make the idea of a national health plan unpalatable to the American public, which, in turn, helps explain the brutal end game to the legislative process.

In chapter 9, we provide some ideas about what might increase and depolarize trust. Specifically, we find that polarization about government shrinks if we focus people on its specific parts rather than the whole. People always view the specific parts of government as more trustworthy than the government as a whole, which helps explain why Americans say they hate government but want to do away with precious little of it. In a second survey experiment, we find that reminding people about some of the things that government does well can increase political trust to some degree. However, we find that these effects are strongest among Democrats and liberals, which means that increasing trust with positive information about government will not do anything to mitigate its polarization.

Finally, we recap the main points of the book. We explore whether polarization based on deep dislike and severe distrust of the other side

is perhaps even worse than polarization based on ideological or policy differences. We suspect it is. In addition, we explain why scholars have tended to underestimate the importance of political trust. Up to now, finding relationships between political trust and variables of normative import has depended a lot on studying the phenomena at the “right” time—when it is salient. Finally, we question how likely it is that circumstances will change for the better any time soon.

CHAPTER TWO

Polarization, Political Trust, and Institutional Responsiveness

Embedded in our argument about the causes of political dysfunction lay several key, interrelated terms: “polarization,” “political trust,” and “institutional responsiveness.” The meanings of these terms all seem straightforward, but they are more elusive than one might first imagine. We therefore define and explain each in detail in this chapter. We argue that, taken together, they help explain the roots of political dysfunction in the United States. Partisans today are polarized not in their policy preferences but rather in their feelings about each other. As a result, political trust has polarized by party, leading to an absence of policy consensus and a gridlocked political system with little incentive to compromise. This is why Washington does not work right now.

We begin by discussing polarization with a particular emphasis on whether the mass public is polarized in a meaningful way. We realize that the existence of polarization must seem self-evident to many, but it turns out that it is not. Indeed, scholars have, to date, turned up strikingly little firm evidence of polarization in the electorate. In this section, we explain why. And, more important, we present evidence that polarization actually does exist among ordinary Americans, just not where scholars have typically been looking. Because trust is one of the areas where polarization in the electorate manifests itself, we next define political trust and explain why it is an important influence in causing people to support government programs. In addition, we explain the key role it can play in helping citizens overcome ideological differences to forge consensus in their opinions about public policy. We then discuss the difficulties inherent in the legislative process and the role that public opinion has played in the past to

nudge the legislative process forward. We argue that it is a role that it is much less likely to play in a polarized political environment. We conclude with a methodological digression that is critically important to supporting the scholarly contribution of our argument. Here we tackle issues about causality and how the multiple methodological tools we employ help us make reliable inferences throughout the book.

On Polarization

Some readers might be shocked to learn that a controversy exists about whether the electorate is polarized. Of course it is, or so it seems. But the reality is not so simple. As is the case with many scholarly debates, whether or not one thinks the electorate is polarized depends on what one means by polarization or where one looks for it. If polarization means that most Americans are staunch liberals or conservatives, like the people who represent them in Congress, then the answer is a resounding no. Consider the data in figure 2.1. As it has done since 1972, the American National Election Study (ANES) asked people in 2012 to place themselves on a seven-point scale arrayed from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative.” Moderate or middle of the road occupies the midpoint of the scale. People can also opt out of placing themselves by answering that they “haven’t thought much about it.” The figure makes clear that nearly

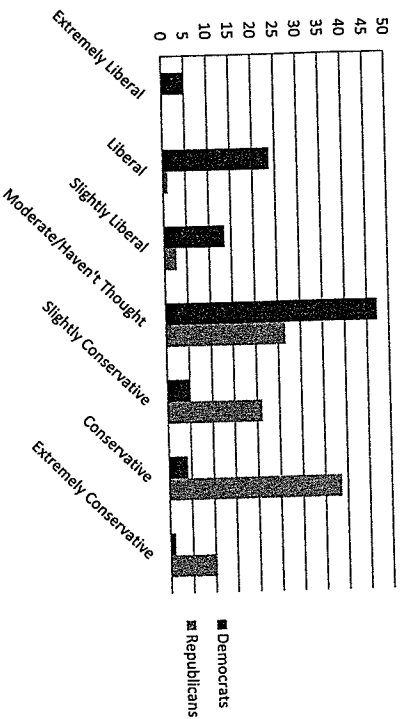


FIGURE 2.1. Ideological self-identification by party identification

Source: American National Election Study, 2012.

half of Democrats and plenty of Republicans, too, either consider themselves “moderate” or say they haven’t thought enough about it to place themselves on the ideological spectrum. In fact, these counterintuitive results appear so clear that one might be tempted to assert that polarization is a media-driven myth (Florina et al. 2005).

Before embracing the seemingly counterintuitive notion that polarization does not exist in the American electorate, it is probably useful to keep in mind that polarization connotes something more than how a picture looks. Moreover, it might be found in places other than people’s ideological leanings and policy preferences. As for how a picture looks, some dismiss polarization claims based on two features of the distribution: (1) the bars in the middle are too tall and (2) the bars in the tails are not sufficiently “fat.” We address both these concerns below.

As for the presence of many people clustered in the middle of the distribution, it is very clearly true. That said, we wonder whether the center of distributions regarding Americans’ preferences and evaluations about *anything*—political or otherwise—would look markedly different. In explaining why Americans pay little attention to politics, scholars often cite “rational ignorance” (Downs 1957). The idea is that people do not care much about politics because they get so little payoff from caring. The story goes that people do care about other things, such as work, family, and, let’s say, baseball. We suspect that if one were to ask a random sample of Americans about their “policy preferences” about the national pastime, the value of advanced statistics (so called sabermetrics) would arouse the deepest divisions. Younger, mathematically inclined fans think they are indispensable. Older, more traditional fans think they are worthless. It seems there would be potential for polarization. Yet, a 2007 Gallup Poll found that only 45 percent of Americans called themselves baseball fans.¹ That probably means the 55 percent of Americans who do not call themselves baseball fans would cluster in the middle of any distribution of preferences for sabermetrics or almost anything else that has to do with baseball. This is a lot like opinions about politics.

One might argue that baseball is a silly example. Its popularity is on the wane, and not everyone is expected to follow it to be a good citizen. Fair enough. Everyone has to eat, so perhaps food would attract more noncentrist evaluations. In 2012, the Huffington Post published a feature on the ten most polarizing foods.² Cilantro occupied the top spot. Apparently there are physiological reasons that help explain why people either love or hate cilantro. However, we suspect that a large percentage of

Americans would have no opinion about *cilantro*. If asked about their *cilantro* sentiments, these people would be most inclined to report that they were either neutral about it or had not thought enough about *cilantro* to form an opinion, just like in politics.

The point here is that it is hard to imagine a preference distribution that would not be heavily weighted in the middle. As it relates to politics, specifically, we know that, among the less informed, survey responses tend to cluster in the middle of the scale (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This is because people do not want to appear ignorant when a survey interviewer asks them a question. As a result, they provide answers about things they do not fully understand, and these answers tend to be in the middle of the scale because that is the safest haven between two alternatives that they cannot make much sense of.

The other concern that skeptics of polarization raise is the absence of fat tails. "Fat tails" indicate that a substantial number of people have opinions near the polar extremes. Defining polarization as such requires a very literal understanding of polarization. However, the problem with such a literal definition as it relates to public opinion data, specifically, is that it, too, may be a standard that is impossible to meet. Whereas a high percentage of the uninformed will tend toward the middle, we suspect that many among the well informed would rather not think of *themselves* as extreme ideologically or extreme in their policy preferences. Extremity carries a negative connotation in American political life. Just ask Barry Goldwater, circa 1964.³ When the news media identifies friends and foes in foreign policy, the line of demarcation is usually presented as moderate good guys versus extremist bad guys. Not surprisingly, then, Americans would rather think about their political opponents than their own side as extreme. As evidence, the percentage of Democrats who classify the Republican Party as "extremely conservative" has climbed from 8 percent in 1972, the first time this question was asked by the ANES, to 38 percent in 2012. The percentage of Republicans who classify the Democratic Party as "extremely liberal" has climbed from 5 percent to 31 percent over the same period. In contrast, only 9 percent of Democrats and 15 percent of Republicans see their own parties as extreme (Hetherington and Roush n.d.). Taken together, these two simple regularities about survey research and American public opinion all but guarantee that pictures of public opinion about issues or ideology like the one in figure 2.1 will never *look* particularly polarized, even if polarization, perhaps considered differently, does exist.

Scholars have employed alternatives to a literal definition of polarization in their examination of policy preferences. They possess certain

advantages over the literal definition, but they are not perfect either. The most common alternative is to consider polarization in terms of a *growing distance* between the preferences of people who identify with the political parties. Such a reckoning suggests Democrats are pulling to the left and Republicans to the right—that polarization is a process, not just a state. By this definition, significant evidence of polarization exists. There is more distance between partisans on policy preferences today than a few decades ago. For example, the Pew Research Foundation released a report in the summer of 2012 that many scholars and journalists used as evidence of growing polarization in the electorate. In it, Pew revealed that, on a battery of forty-eight policy and values items they have tracked since 1987, the average Republican and average Democrat were eighteen percentage points apart. The difference was only about 10 percentage points when Pew first started to ask these questions in the 1980s, so it appears that the US electorate is in the *process* of polarizing.

There are, however, problems with thinking about polarization this way, too. Although we like the notion that polarization might be best thought of as a process rather than a state, what if the increase in distance between Republicans and Democrats was from 1 percentage point to 5 percentage points? Given that the distance could theoretically be 100 percentage points, such a relatively small difference, even if growing, seems to suggest something other than polarization. Even 18 percentage points might not seem like much to many. For the process to rise to the level of polarization, how far apart do the average Republican and the average Democrat have to be? As a practical matter, the emphasis on "how far apart" can encourage a Potter Stewart–esque approach to assessing whether polarization exists. Stewart, readers might recall, was the Supreme Court Justice in the 1960s who said that he could not define obscenity but that he knew it when he saw it. Just as with experts at an art exhibit, two scholars can look at that same data and reach different conclusions about how much difference is enough to claim that polarization in the electorate exists.

In addition, the larger average distances between partisans have most often developed from people sorting themselves into the correct party (conservative Democrats becoming Republicans and liberal Republicans becoming Democrats) without many in either party taking a more extreme position on much of anything (Florina et al. 2005; Levendusky 2009). Although we have argued above that scholars should not be overly focused on how fat the tails of distributions are, it still seems to us that something about people's opinions must become more extreme to merit the term "polarization." It is possible to identify groups in the electorate

that do show evidence of more extreme position-taking. In fact, among the most knowledgeable 10–15 percent of the electorate, the distribution of preferences of Republicans and Democrats looks much like the picture of polarization in Congress that we show below in figure 2.2b (Lauderdale 2013). But 10–15 percent of the electorate seems a small sliver indeed.

Another alternative that polarization proponents have pursued is to demonstrate a greater consistency of opinion. Specifically, Democrats and Republicans today give more consistently liberal and conservative responses, respectively, when asked their opinions about various issues than in decades past (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Abramowitz 2010). Converse (1964) labeled this understanding of “what goes with what” *constraint*. Although we agree that constraint has increased dramatically, a greater constraint and greater extremity are not synonymous. Consider a Democrat who, on five issues, places himself one point to the left of center of a seven-point scale. He would score a maximum five points. Consider a second Democrat who, on the same five issues, places herself at one on four of the issues and at the scale’s midpoint on one of them. That respondent would receive a score of only four points. It would be hard to argue, however, that the opinions of the second respondent are not more extreme, or polarized, than those of the first.

Moreover, we wonder how *meaningful* people’s opinions on a matter are if they are willing to change their position on it simply because they have come to learn their party leaders believe a certain thing. People tend to change opinions on things that are peripheral to who they are politically and hold fast to the things that matter to them (Converse 1964). This is important because polarization conceptually suggests people care deeply about something. People who change their minds about an issue because of a party cue do not seem particularly intense in their preference about that issue to us.⁴

In sum, we perceive problems with assessing polarization in the electorate based on a literal definition because, as it relates to policy and ideology, it is a standard that is impossible to meet. We are somewhat more satisfied with the notion that polarization is best thought of as a process, with increasing average distances between groups over time. But we are unsettled by the fact that the process of polarization in Americans’ policy preferences and ideology is mostly driven by party sorting rather than people taking increasingly extreme positions. Some indication of a greater extremity of beliefs seems conceptually critical in the term “polarization.”

Hence we believe that further alternatives to thinking about how polarization in the electorate might manifest itself must be explored.

Is Polarization in Washington Exclusively Ideological?

In focusing their search on ideology and policy preferences for evidence of polarization in the electorate, we believe scholars might be looking in the wrong places. Our thinking is, in part, driven by the belief that the nature of the divide between Republicans and Democrats in Congress is somewhat less ideological than is commonly believed. What members of Congress definitely do much more today than they used to is vote the same way as other members of their party caucus. Scholars and congressional observers have many different ways to measure party unity (see, for example, Carson et al. 2010; Crespin, Rohde, and Vander Wielen 2013; Krehbiel 2000; Rohde 1991). All tell the same story. The parties in Congress vote *en bloc* much more often today than before, and the two caucuses disagree much more often today than before.

The most common interpretation of this change in congressional behavior is that congressional parties are *ideologically* polarized today. The evidence for the emergence of ideological polarization is usually depicted in graphs like those presented in figures 2.2a and 2.2b. They capture two snapshots of the apparent ideology of Republican and Democratic House members, one taken in the 1970s and the other in the 2000s. Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal developed the measure of ideology we use in the figures, called a DW-NOMINATE score. They use all available roll call votes to generate an estimate of each House member’s ideology in such a way that they can be compared over time. Figure 2.2a displays the distribution of House ideology in 1973–74, broken down by party. Figure 2.2b displays the distribution using data from 2011 to 2012.

It is readily apparent that the middle has disappeared from Congress. In the 92nd Congress, 108 members, nearly a quarter of the House, had scores between –0.2 and 0.2. Indeed, 80 or so conservative Democratic and liberal Republican House members would have fit comfortably in the other party back then. The most common category for Republican members of the House to fall into was between 0.2 and 0.3 on this scale, and the most common category for Democrats was between –0.4 and –0.5.

Compare these data with those from the present day. In the 112th Congress, which is the most recent for which data are available, only 15 of the 435 members of the House had DW-NOMINATE scores between –0.2

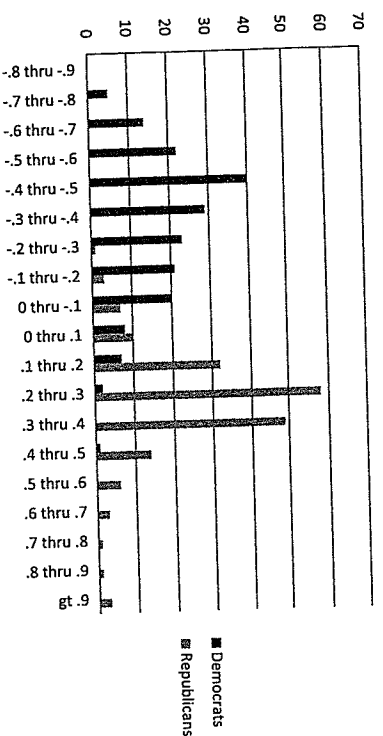


FIGURE 2.2a. "Ideology" of members of House of Representatives, 92nd (1973-74) Congress by party, DW-NOMINATE scores

Source: Voteview.com, <http://www.voteview.com>.

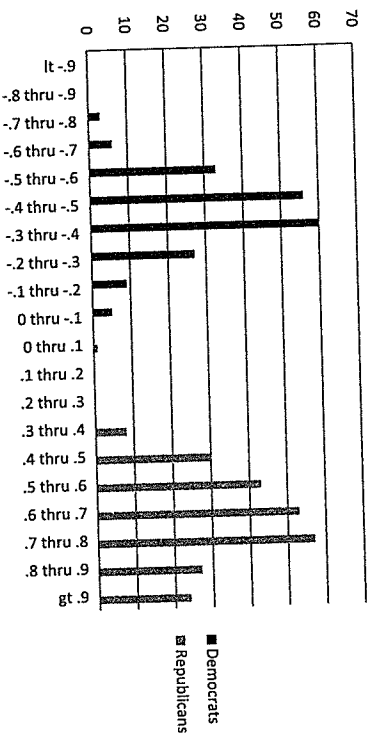


FIGURE 2.2b. "Ideology" of members of House of Representatives, 112th (2011-12) Congress by party, DW-NOMINATE scores

Sources: American National Election Study, 2011, cumulative data file; American National Election Study, 2012, YouGov survey.

and 0.2. Whereas fewer than 30 Republicans had ideology scores of 0.4 or more in the 92nd Congress, all but 9 of them had scores at least that high in the 112th Congress. In fact, as recently as the 110th Congress, only 7 Republicans had DW-NOMINATE scores of greater than 0.8, but that number reached 51 only 4 years later.⁵ Regardless, the key point here is that there is complete ideological separation between the parties in Congress these days.

In the scholarly debate about polarization in the electorate, skeptics point to how different the distribution of ideology in the public depicted in figure 2.1 looks compared with the distribution of ideology in the House of Representatives depicted in figure 2.2b. The complete separation of Republicans from Democrats in Congress, combined with more members now near the poles, is all but universally interpreted as ideological polarization in Congress. The absence of such a picture as it relates to ideology in the electorate causes many scholars to argue that the public is not polarized.

We believe the story is more complicated as it relates to polarization both in Congress and, as a consequence, in the electorate. First, congressional polarization is likely not exclusively ideological. Recall that the measure of ideology that we used to create figures 2.2a and 2.2b (and all the other measures of ideology that scholars and congressional observers use) was derived from the votes cast by members of Congress. It is just an assumption that members' votes are driven by their ideology as opposed to some other motivation. In general, such an assumption makes sense. Scholars have known for decades that office holders are much more ideological than ordinary Americans are (Converse 1964; McClosky and Brill 1983; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). In fact, there is plenty of evidence that members are more ideologically motivated now than when the landmark studies comparing representatives and the represented were carried out (Cohen et al. 2008).

We suspect, however, that something in addition to ideology drives congressional voting behavior at times. How else can conservative ideas become liberal ideas in the space of fewer than twenty years? In a June 2012 *New Yorker* article titled "Why Republicans Oppose the Individual Health-Care Mandate," Ezra Klein traces how a number of policies that Democrats pursued in Barack Obama's first term were born in conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation. For example, the most controversial part of Obamacare, the individual mandate, was the conservative key to lowering rates by increasing the risk pool to include healthy people while generating lots of new business for insurance companies, a frequent ally of Republican lawmakers. Similarly, insurance exchanges for those not covered by their employer rely on a market approach to pooling risk, which is designed to lower rates for the self-employed and those who work for businesses too small to provide group insurance plans. Conservatives tend to like markets more than liberals do. Republican governor of Massachusetts Mitt Romney championed what is widely considered the

state-level pilot program that Obamacare would later be based on. He received almost unanimous support from Republicans in both the state house and state senate. Fewer than ten years later, however, only a single Republican voted for the Affordable Care Act (ACA) when it came before Congress.

Obamacare is not the only example. Republicans universally argued against greatly increased government spending as stimulus after financial sector panic of 2008–9, but Ronald Reagan, the great touchstone of modern American conservatism, governed as a Keynesian in the early 1980s when economic times were tough. George W. Bush apparently had no fear of deficit spending in the early 2000s either. We don't mean to suggest that only Republicans are guilty of ideological hypocrisy. When Republicans during George W. Bush's presidency adopted several Democratic ideas, such as a Medicare prescription drug plan and a national approach to education testing, Democrats in Washington provided little support. These examples all suggest that even the more ideological parties of today are not rigidly ideological.

Rather than ideology, perhaps a central reason Obama's approach to health care (or cap and trade or any number of other proposals) became unacceptable to Republican lawmakers in the 2000s was that Democrats advocated it. In other words, the GOP's motivation to oppose it was partisan, not ideological. Indeed, scholars have shown that a large number of the votes that make up measures of congressional ideology come from votes on procedure; they are not solely votes on policy matters (Theriault 2008). Even when the vote in question does involve a policy matter, it is possible that there is a partisan advantage to be gained from holding such a vote. For example, in the 2011–12 Congress, the measures of congressional ideology that apparently reveal so much ideological polarization include no fewer than forty separate votes in the House to repeal health care reform (Clinton, Katznelson, and Lapinski forthcoming). Holding all those votes was clearly a partisan tactic employed by Republicans to remind their base just how strongly they opposed President Obama.

The politics of the late-1800s provide a good illustration of our thinking. The “Gilded Age” Congresses from 1876 to 1896 appear, by measures of ideological polarization like the DW-NOMINATE score, to be among the most polarized ever. During this period, however, the substance of party disagreements was rarely ideological. Instead, they most often revolved around patronage and how government benefits would be distributed (Lee n.d.). In a similar vein, the New Deal Congresses reveal

among the lowest levels of party polarization, despite the fact that huge ideological principles about the proper role of government were at stake, and pitched battles were waged across party lines (Clinton, Katznelson, and Lapinski forthcoming). One reason that the measures of polarization might not pick up what they are supposed to is that the Gilded Age Congresses featured close partisan margins, which encouraged more party-line voting. In contrast, the New Deal Congresses featured enormous Democratic majorities, which allowed a fair number of members to buck party leadership without endangering final passages of bills.

Indeed, research increasingly suggests that the close partisan margins in the House and Senate drive much of the acrimony in Washington today (see especially Lee 2009). When caucus leaders from the minority party believe the next election could put them in the majority, they are loath to cooperate with their adversaries. The minority does not want to provide the majority with accomplishments that they can run on in the next election (Lee 2009; Mann and Ornstein 2012). The close margins also produce a team mentality among caucus members that creates more pressure to toe the party line.⁶ Combined with the stronger powers that contemporary congressional leaders wield, close margins in Congress contribute to party line voting. The key point here is that, in such cases, there is nothing inherently philosophical or ideological about the disagreements between Republicans and Democrats.⁷

In making this distinction between partisanship and ideology, we are not arguing that congressional polarization is devoid of ideology. We fully believe that there is an important ideological component to congressional polarization. Many, perhaps even most, party disagreements do have the age-old conflict between activist and limited government at their core. However, it is equally clear to us that at least some of what *appears* to be ideological polarization in Congress is simply partisanship, in that it is motivated by a desire to rob the other party of victory. As such, disagreements between congressional parties are not always the result of overarching philosophical differences about what government ought to do, even though our measures of ideology in Congress tacitly treat them as such.

The reason we have explored the basis of polarization among office holders is because we think it suggests the need for a wider search for polarization in the electorate. If congressional polarization is not solely about ideology, then perhaps ideological preferences are not the only, or even best, places to look for polarization in the electorate. Based on

research about the survey response and the apparent nature of conflict between the parties in Washington, it is little wonder to us that ordinary Americans fail to line up consistently on the far right and far left on policy questions or in their ideological predispositions. Whether out of disinterest, dispassion, or an inability to keep up with party elites' latest zigs and zags, ordinary Americans' preferences will always tend to cluster toward the middle and lack extremity. This, however, does not mean that polarization doesn't exist.

Our Approach to Polarization

To recap, we have argued that ideology and issue preferences might not be the best place to search for polarization in the electorate, particularly when using a literal definition of polarization in assessing its presence or absence. Because a substantial percentage of Americans do not know much about political issues or what an ideology is, a substantial percentage of their responses will cluster in the center of distributions. And because people would rather think of themselves as moderate and their opponents as extreme, distributions of opinion about policy matters and ideology will rarely produce fat tails. That much we know from decades studying how people respond to public opinion polls. Not only that, but the cues that party elites provide are not exclusively ideological. Much of it is raw political conflict driven by desire to gain political advantage.

If ideological predispositions and issue preferences are the wrong places to look, then what is the right place? We believe indications of polarization ought to be rooted in how people *feel* rather than in how they think or where they stand. Because it takes much less expertise to express strong feelings than it takes to express strong policy preferences, a smaller percentage of Americans will disqualify themselves from appearing polarized because of their political ignorance. Consider, for example, the iconic Tea Party member carrying a sign warning the federal government to keep its hands off her Medicare ("don't steal from Medicare to pay for socialized medicine"). She might have a hard time expressing to a survey interviewer where she stands ideologically, even though she clearly cares very deeply about something political; however, we suspect she would have no trouble expressing her dislike and distrust of the Democratic Party and President Obama.

Much has happened during the past generation that might polarize political feelings. First and foremost, the polarization of elite-level politics is

critical. The opinions that ordinary Americans express almost always reflect how those in Washington behave (Key 1966). When elites are more partisan, the masses are, too (Hetherington 2001). As we detailed above, officeholders today provide the impression that partisans of different stripes do not agree on anything, big or small. This provides partisans in the electorate a sense that the ideas of the other side are not worth considering—that those on the other side are flawed and do not possess the right values and goals. Ordinary Americans will follow these cues as best they can, with expressions of negative feelings being the most likely manifestation.

The way politics is presented to people has also changed over the past generation to encourage stronger affective reactions. Iyengar and his various collaborators place much of the blame on increasingly negative political campaigns (see Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2014). But that is not all that has changed. The emergence of cable news outlets like Fox News and MSNBC, along with websites such as Red State and Talking Points Memo, allow people to live inside information bubbles that constantly remind them that their side is good and, especially, that the other side is bad. This departs from a bygone era when most everyone, regardless of political predispositions, watched the same three national news programs and read newspapers that adhered to the same neutrality norms. Similarly, political talk shows these days are purposefully presented in an uncivil manner that violates social norms and, as a consequence, sharpens feelings (Mutz and Reeves 2005). The O'Reilly Factor of today is not at all like the Meet the Press of yesteryear. Although a surprisingly small percentage of Americans view these programs and read these blogs themselves (Prior 2013), those who do will tend to be opinion leaders for others in their peer groups. This means that the changed media environment could have an important indirect effect on a large cross section of the public.

In addition, the contemporary issue agenda is ripe to produce stronger feelings. Carrinnes and Stimson (1988) suggest that only easy, symbolic issues that operate at the gut level, such as race, have the power to polarize. Race is not alone among salient issues with such power. Another is abortion rights (Adams 1997). Although it is true that the majority of Americans have a "pro-choice-but" position on the issue (Florina, Abrams, and Pope 2010), that reality might be less important than how people perceive it. Abortion is polarizing because of what it stands for—for example, what it says about the proper role of women in society and the values that

accompany that position (Luker 1985) or how the unborn ought to be considered. Such symbolic conflicts may transcend specific issues. Hetherington and Weiler (2009) argue that the American political system has evolved such that a central element of party identification hinges on fundamental views of how a good society ought to operate. Should it be more hierarchically organized and authority based, or should it be more horizontally organized and authority questioning? They suggest that political conflicts are more polarizing when issues that touch on this worldview divide become salient. Of consequence, a plethora of such issues are central to party conflict today, including race, feminism, crime and punishment, sexual orientation, immigration, and how to deal with terrorism.

Because so many easy, symbolic issues now occupy considerable space on the political agenda, we suspect that, increasingly, those on one side of the divide have come to view their political opponents as nefarious characters with dangerous ideas. Hence polarized feelings might be more likely to show up in assessments of enemies rather than of friends. Even if people do not see those on their own side as angels, they may see those on the other as devils. Such assessments of the other side, however, probably will not manifest as extreme policy preferences or ideological predispositions, which is where scholars have been looking for polarization. People are motivated to see their own positions as moderate and responsible. It is those on the other side who are extreme. It is in their feelings about the other side that polarization ought to manifest.

Evidence of Affective Polarization

When scholars have looked for polarization in feelings (so-called affective polarization), they have often found it (see, for example, Haidt and Hetherington 2012). Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) turn up many indications of polarized feelings, none more interesting than the increased discomfort partisans express in the proposition that a family member might marry a person who identifies with the other party. Back in the 1960s, almost no Americans, neither Republicans nor Democrats, expressed any concern at all about “partisan internarrriage.” In 2010, however, a third of Democrats and nearly half of Republicans expressed at least moderate concern about nuptials across party lines. In a follow-up paper, Iyengar and Westwood (2014) demonstrate that feelings about parties are sufficiently strong today to produce both implicit and explicit biases that are stronger than even those attached to race. For example, partisans

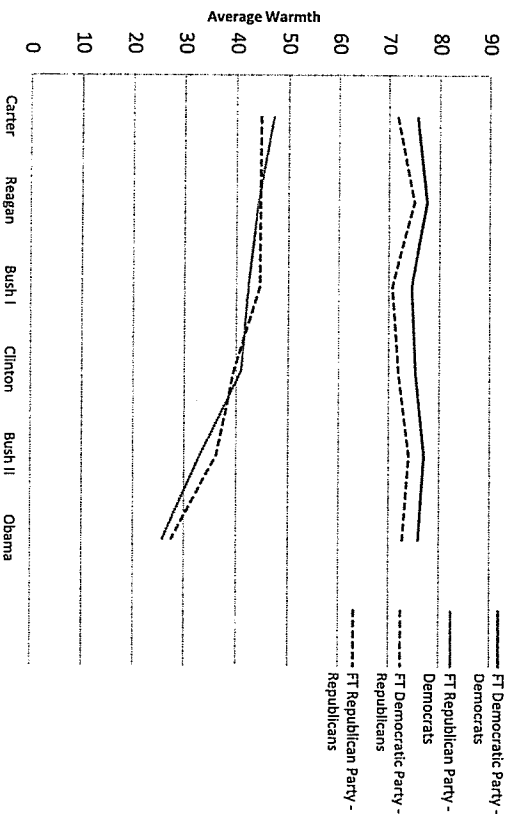


FIGURE 2.3. Feelings about the parties by partisanship

Sources: American National Election Study, 2011, cumulative data file; American National Election Study, 2011 and 2012, YouGov survey.

were much more likely to favor the résumés of people who had the same partisanship than those who had the same race. Partisan bias persisted, moreover, even when the résumés of their copartisans were not impressive. Similarly, a 2014 Pew Research Center study revealed that more than a quarter of Democrats and more than a third of Republicans viewed the other party as “a threat to the nation’s well-being.” It is hard to imagine a more extreme manifestation of negative feelings. More generally, Pew found that partisans’ “very unfavorable” attitudes toward the other party more than doubled between 1994 and 2004 (Pew Research Center 2014).

To explore more systematically how people’s feelings about political combatants have changed over time, we turn again to the ANES. It has been asking people since the 1970s to place the major political parties on what they call “feeling thermometers.” People can rate groups they like as high as one hundred degrees and groups they dislike as low as zero degrees. If people have neutral feelings toward a group, they are instructed to rate them at fifty degrees.

Figure 2.3 reveals that Democrats’ feelings about the Republican Party and Republicans’ feelings about the Democratic Party have grown much more negative of late, while their feelings about their own party

have remained constant over time. This is much as we expected and what others have also shown (see, for example, Haidt and Hetherington 2012; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). We group the data in the figure by presidential administration to smooth out some of the year-by-year noise. Although specific years do not appear in the figure, it is sometimes useful to reference them, which we do below.

Early in the time series, those who identified with a party did not express much distaste for the other party. Over the course of the Reagan years, for example, the average score that a Republican rated the Democratic Party was forty-five degrees, and the average score that a Democrat rated the Republican Party was forty-four degrees. These are not exactly balmy temperatures, but they are warm enough to allow students in Maine to break out the Bermuda shorts in March.⁸ Fast forwarding to 2000, partisans, particularly Republicans, had grown somewhat more negative toward the other side. Republicans rated the Democratic Party at an average of thirty-eight degrees, whereas Democrats in 2000 rated the Republicans at forty-one degrees—a little lower than they did during the Reagan years.

By 2008, partisans' feelings toward the other party had dropped more noticeably, especially, this time, among Democrats. They rated the Republican Party at an icy thirty degrees. Republicans' average rating of the Democratic Party also dropped in 2008 to a barely liquid thirty-four degrees. To put those scores into perspective, the average score that all Americans gave to "illegal immigrants"—no one's favorite group—was forty degrees. Feelings about gays and lesbians among Americans during the height of the AIDS epidemic in the mid-to-late 1980s were about the same as those that partisans expressed about the other party during the George W. Bush years.

Partisans' feelings about the other party would only grow more negative during Obama's first term. Although the ANES did not ask feeling thermometer questions in 2010, YouGov, an Internet-based survey firm that gathers and weights data from national samples, did in 2011.⁹ That survey found that Republicans gave the Democratic Party an average reading of only eighteen degrees; Democrats gave the Republican Party the same Lambeau Field in December-like temperature reading.¹⁰ Although ANES data indicate that feelings about the other side warmed a bit in 2012, the averages were still unprecedently low relative to the rest of the ANES time series.

Because opinion extremity is often considered an important component of polarization, we examine how the distributions of responses from Democrats and Republicans to the party feeling thermometers have

changed over time. Do these distributions show movement toward the poles that those who champion a literal definition of polarization require as evidence? To answer this question, we break the one-hundred-degree political party thermometers into ten separate ten-degree wide intervals and compare two snapshots, one taken in 1980, the first presidential election year the ANES asked the party thermometers, and the other taken in 2012, the most recent presidential election year that the ANES asked the thermometers. Recall from the data in figure 2.3 that we are unlikely to see change in the distribution of how partisans feel about their own party. Those have remained relatively constant over time. Our focus is on the distributions of feelings that partisans express about the other party. That said, partisans' feelings about their own party have always been pretty positive, with a definite clustering of responses toward the favorable pole of the distribution in both snapshots.

The results appear in figure 2.4. Unlike people's ideological self-placement or how they place themselves on issue scales, we see significant movement toward the feeling thermometer poles, specifically as it relates to partisans' increased negativity toward the other party. Back in 1980, only about 7 percent of Republicans and Democrats, respectively, provided the other party feeling thermometer scores of ten degrees or fewer. And a little more than 10 percent of Republicans and Democrats provided scores of twenty degrees or fewer to their political adversaries. For partisans of both stripes, the most common score they provided for the other party fell in the interval between forty-one and fifty degrees.

The story was fundamentally different in 2012. Fully 30 percent of Democrats provided the Republican Party a feeling thermometer score of ten degrees or fewer—about twice the percentage that falls into any other interval. The other two most highly populated intervals other than the most negative one were those between eleven and twenty degrees and twenty-one and thirty degrees. Indeed, more than 60 percent of Democrats' responses about the Republican Party fell in the three intervals at or closest to the unfavorable pole. Increasingly polarized feelings about the Democratic Party are also occurring among Republican partisans. In 2012, the most common Republican rating of the Democratic Party was between zero and ten degrees. Similar to the Democrats, about 58 percent of Republican responses fell into the coolest three intervals, those representing scores of thirty degrees or fewer. In sum, Republicans and Democrats are abandoning the middle and heading for the poles in their negative feelings about the other party.¹¹

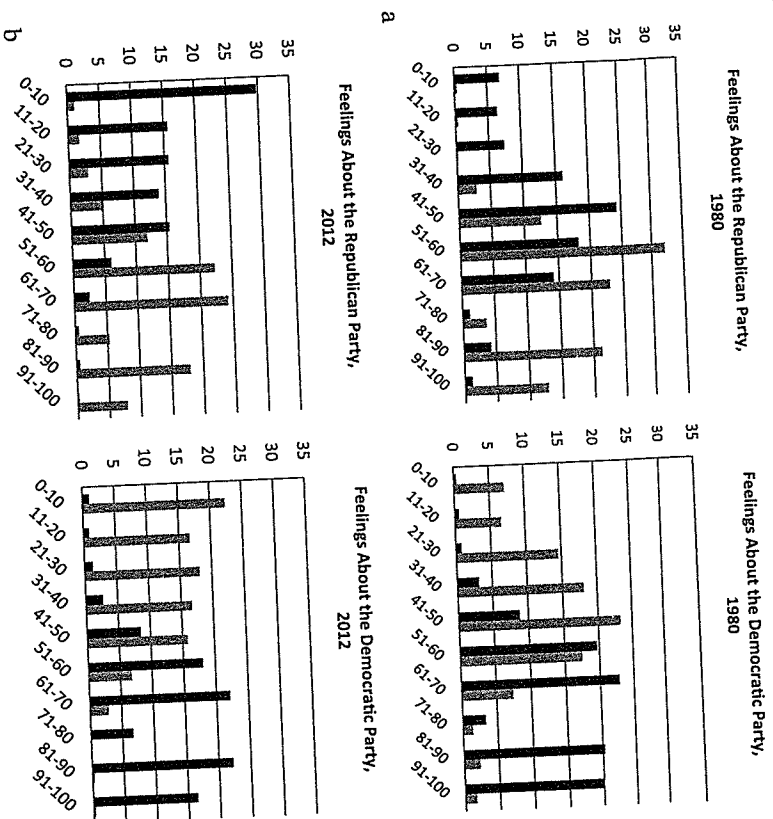


FIGURE 2.4. Increasingly negative feelings about the other party, 1980 and 2012

Sources: American National Election Study, 2012, cumulative data file; American National Election Study, 2012.

Is it of consequence that partisans today dislike the other side so much more intensely? We suspect it has had pernicious, indirect effects that bear directly on the thesis of this book. Specifically, we argue that increased dislike of the opposition party is central to understanding the decrease in trust in government expressed by partisans of one side when the other side is in power. This is so because people generally do not tend to trust things they do not like. Hence, when the government is run by a party that a person strongly dislikes—a condition that is now the norm—he or she will be unlikely to express much trust in government. We provide evidence for our contention in chapter 4.

For now, we again emphasize the extreme partisan nature of trust responses. Recall from chapter 1 that, in 2010, more than 50 percent of self-identified Republicans said that they *never* trusted the government in Washington to do what is right. Never. They could have said “almost

always,” “most of the time,” or even just “some of the time.” But when we gave them the option to say “never,” more than 50 percent of out-party partisans availed themselves of the opportunity to offer this evaluation. “Never” is an extreme word. Indeed, many of us are brought up to “never say never.” Like with feelings that people express about people or groups, it also makes sense that we might find evidence of polarization in trust evaluations. Trust in government is an easy concept to understand. Unlike with issues and ideology, people do not have to be experts to know how much they trust something. Almost everyone has experience forming trust judgments in their everyday lives. Trust in government is just an extension of a familiar task.

In sum, we believe a central reason scholars have struggled to turn up evidence of polarization in the electorate is that they have been looking in the wrong places. The focus has most often been on areas that are notoriously difficult for many Americans to understand. Because less knowledgeable people tend to place themselves in the middle categories when asked about policies and ideology (e.g., Della Cargini and Keeter 1996; Treier and Hillygus 2009), a focus on such areas will bias findings toward moderation. Feelings about the parties and simple heuristics like trust are different. They require little political expertise. In that sense, we find polarization in the place it is most likely to manifest itself in the electorate.

We next turn to an in depth treatment of what political trust is, when it should matter, and for whom it should matter. This section will lay the foundation for why its polarization causes Washington to accomplish less.

On Trust

The concept of political trust has captured the interest of social scientists for more than a half century. Scholars believed political trust was important because it contributed to the legitimacy and longevity of governments, providing a “reservoir of support” for leaders even during hard times (Easton 1965). Much to the dismay of scholars of the time, political trust in the United States entered a period of sharp decline soon after scholars started to measure it in 1958. In 1964, 76 percent of Americans trusted the government to do what is right at least most of the time. That figure fell to 35 percent by 1974 and to 25 percent by 1980. Early research on political trust was motivated by a desire to understand and explain this precipitous decline (cf. Citrin 1974; Miller 1974). Not only was this important because trust was declining, but it was also important because,

despite the troubling decline in political trust, neither the legitimacy nor longevity of American institutions seemed to be in much doubt. To be sure, Americans protested for civil rights and women's rights and against the Vietnam War, but significantly changing the structure of government was never on the table, even as trust dropped to unprecedentedly low levels.

What, then, do people mean when they say they do or don't trust the government? A common definition of political trust is a feeling that people have about government based on their perceptions of its performance relative to their expectations of how it ought to perform (Hetherington 1998, 2005; Miller 1974; Stokes 1962). This definition places a spotlight on government *performance* in understanding how much a citizenry trusts its government and what, in the future, might cause it to rise and fall. When people perceive that government performance meets expectations, political trust ought to flourish. When they do not, trust ought to decay.

Other scholars have rightly argued that a wholly performance-based definition of trust is incomplete. Instead, they suggest that citizens care not only about outcomes but also about the *processes* through which those outcomes emerged (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). In particular, Americans do not like to see democracy in action, even though they profess loving democracy in theory. The conflict inherent in the "sausage-making" process is not attractive to most because they mistakenly believe commonsense solutions to political problems are obvious and readily available; their representatives should simply come together to implement them. As evidence of this argument's wisdom, consider how much more confidence Americans have in the Supreme Court, an institution in which political conflict is private, than in Congress, an institution in which political conflict is public. According to the 2012 General Social Survey, 29 percent of Americans express at least "a great deal of confidence" in the Supreme Court, whereas only 6 percent express that much confidence in Congress (Smith, Hout, and Marsden 2012). In general, when people perceive the governing process to be fair and responsive, political trust rises, and, when they do not, it falls.

Still other research suggests that levels of political trust are a reflection of governmental *probity* or, more precisely, the absence of it. Political trust tends to decline during periods of government scandals (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Hetherington and Rudolph 2008; Keele 2007) and rises in its absence. Although scandals often carry a high profile and, as a consequence, seem devastating to public trust, it is best not to

overestimate their importance. Trust continued to decline for years after Richard Nixon resigned after Watergate, and it actually rose in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky scandal during the Clinton presidency. Scandals have an effect, but their impact is most often short lived.

Why Should Trust Matter?

Up to this point, our focus has been on what contributes to how much people trust government. But perhaps an even more important question is, why should we expect trust to matter and in what ways?

Our reasoning as to why trust matters starts from a time-honored perspective in the study of American politics. Most people do not know much about most things political (e.g., Converse 1964). Thinkers of a bygone era might have hoped ordinary citizens in modern democracies would approach the sophistication we attribute to the ancient Athenians. But Stimson (2004) puts it best in explaining what levels of citizen competence are actually like: "Such a view [of competence] survived a couple thousand years of speculation about the public. Its death was quick and brutal when early students of public opinion actually went out and interviewed ordinary people in surveys" (13). These surveys revealed that Americans know shockingly little about public affairs.

Because people's knowledge of political matters is far from encyclopedic, they need to employ rules of thumb to get by. Trust in government can provide one such rule of thumb or, to use the social science term, "heuristic." Heuristics are mental shortcuts that enable people to make judgments more effortlessly and, as a result, more efficiently than gathering all available information about a topic. The concept of heuristics is premised on the assumption that people prefer to expend as little effort as possible when trying to make judgments or decisions.

Examples of heuristic reasoning abound, both in life and in politics. When dining out, a person might encounter a dessert tray that has unfamiliar offerings but familiar ingredients. If, for example, a person likes chocolate and orders an unfamiliar chocolate-based dessert because he or she surmises from past experience with chocolate that he or she will like it, that person has employed a heuristic. Although heuristics can lead people astray at times (e.g., a chocolate-lover might be quite disappointed by German chocolate cake), people use them all the time to good effect in navigating a complex world.

Our story about chocolate desserts illustrates the "representativeness

heuristic." The representativeness heuristic enables people to make inferences about whether a person or object belongs to a particular category without paying the cost of gathering and analyzing a great deal of information. We can apply heuristics to politics as well. A voter seeks to determine whether an unknown candidate appearing in a television ad is a Republican or a Democrat. The ad mentions that the candidate is a pro-life member of the National Rifle Association who wants to repeal Obamacare. Based on what the voter in question knows about the stereotypical traits of each political party, he or she might reasonably conclude that the unknown candidate is a Republican. Although the representativeness heuristic can lead people to make occasional errors, it generally allows them to make good inferences through a relatively simple and efficient process.

Because people are not always (or perhaps not often) willing or able to sort through the complex details of a new policy initiative, they naturally search for ways to simplify decision making when they are asked to decide where they stand on it. Using political trust as a heuristic, people can decide their support for new government policies or actions with relative ease. The decision to endorse or reject a proposed policy turns on the question of trust: "other things equal, if people perceive the architect of policies as untrustworthy, they will reject its policies; if they consider it trustworthy, they will be more inclined to embrace them" (Hetherington 2005: 51). The trust heuristic is a powerful predictor of policy support because it is based, in part, on citizens' satisfaction with its past actions.

Of course, our reasoning suggests that trust, in addition to being backward looking, also signals citizens' willingness to believe government promises about the future consequences of a proposed policy or action (Rudolph 2009). This occurs, psychologists contend, because trust increases the likelihood that messages will be accepted and, ultimately, will be persuasive (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953; Hovland and Weiss 1951). Consider, for example, a newly married couple that must decide between purchasing a small but affordable two-bedroom house and a larger but more expensive three-bedroom house. A well-intentioned but unknown realtor urges the young couple to purchase the larger home because it is located in a nicer neighborhood and is a better long-term investment than the two-bedroom house. But the realtor, the couple recognizes, would also stand to earn a bigger commission on the purchase of the more expensive house. Without trust, it may be difficult for the couple to accept the realtor's arguments and be persuaded to purchase the larger home.

Instead, suppose that the bride's parents advocate the purchase of the larger house because it will offer more room and a bigger yard for the grandchildren they hope will soon be forthcoming. If the couple trusts the bride's parents, which is probably more likely than them trusting the realtor, they are more likely to accept the parents' arguments and be persuaded to purchase the larger home. In short, trust can affect whether people internalize others' arguments and, in turn, subscribe to their ideas.

Given its implications for building support for future policies, political trust serves as a meaningful indicator of public opinion. It provides an important signal to lawmakers about whether the public is likely to back certain types of initiatives at any particular moment. In this respect, it is not unlike other indicators of public opinion, such as ideology. Indeed, it would seem on the surface that someone who is distrustful of government and someone who is conservative would want the same things. Despite some similarities, however, political trust is distinct from ideology, the latter with more philosophical objections to government than the former. "While the distrustful distrust *this* government and thus want to minimize its involvement in certain areas, they might embrace government involvement in [other] areas if they trusted it would do a good job. This is not true of conservative ideologues. Outside of national defense and law and order issues, they oppose government on philosophical grounds, no matter its quality" (Hetherington 2005: 60).

Political trust is also distinct from political approval. Presidential approval, for example, is typically measured by asking citizens whether they approve or disapprove of how the president is handling his or her job. In other words, it is clearly linked to past or current performance-based considerations. It is an indicator of support for what the president has done or is doing. Although political trust is partly a function of performance-based considerations, it is also an indicator of future support based on that which is unobservable. Political trust is, in this respect, not unlike religious faith. If faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,"¹² then political trust is the belief that government will do rightly in the future. Political trust is, from this perspective, a kind of faith in the government.

In sum, political trust is a barometer of citizens' feelings toward government. It is shaped by a blend of considerations concerning government performance, processes, probity, and, we will argue in subsequent chapters, more. It functions as a useful heuristic, or shortcut, that helps citizens make decisions about what government should do. It, therefore,

ought to have a profound effect on people's preferences across a broad range of issues.

For Whom Should Trust Matter?

One central argument of ours is that trust is not equally necessary for all Americans. Some people will support or oppose policies regardless of how much they trust government. Trust, however, will have a particularly strong influence on the preferences of the very people who are most central to understanding whether or not public consensus on an issue develops and, in turn, whether public opinion encourages policy makers toward action. Specifically, political trust is important when government intervention requires people to make either material (Hetherington and Globetti 2002; Hetherington 2005) or ideological (Rudolph and Evans 2005; Rudolph 2009) sacrifices. When government programs require even perceived sacrifices, those asked to make them need to trust government to support such programs. In contrast, the beneficiaries of such programs do not need to trust government to support those policies because they do not pay the costs; they only reap the benefits.

Most important to our argument is the notion of ideological sacrifice. An ideological sacrifice is required for a liberal to follow a conservative leader's ideas or for a conservative to follow a liberal leader's ideas. Because almost no trust in government exists these days among those ideologically opposite the governing administration, few ordinary Americans are willing to make ideological sacrifices any longer. We argue that this has enormous implications for the role of public opinion in policy making. Republicans in the electorate will not support Democratic ideas when Democrats run the government, and Democrats in the electorate will not support Republican ideas when Republicans run the government. In a polarized environment in Washington, minority party members in Congress will, in turn, feel little pressure from their constituents to reach compromises on policy matters with the governing party. As a result, political gridlock remains the order of the day.

To sum up the ground we have covered so far, we find evidence of polarization in partisans' feelings about the other party. This has caused trust in government to polarize because people do not tend to trust things that are run by people they do not like. (We provide empirical evidence for this in chapter 4.) The polarization of trust is particularly consequential because so few out-party partisans are willing to make ideological

sacrifices, so consensus on issues now rarely develops. (We provide empirical evidence for this in chapters 6–8.) As we discuss below, political institutions were designed to work slowly. The existence of policy consensus in the electorate can give institutions a nudge. But without it, those who occupy those institutions need not be particularly concerned with public opinion.

On Institutional Responsiveness

The Framers conceived a set of governing institutions designed to frustrate change. Compared with most other democracies, the legislative process in the United States is a labyrinth with so many potential choke points that it is something of a miracle that legislative accomplishments occur at all. Bills must traverse two houses of Congress. They can (and usually do) die in subcommittees, committees, or on the floor in either the House or Senate. If bills successfully navigate the legislative process, the president can veto them. Courts can find acts of Congress unconstitutional. Although it might seem counterintuitive, the Framers actually had a certain level of institutional unresponsiveness in mind when they wrote the Constitution. They did not want to make change easy.

That said, they also wanted a federal government that could provide vigorous leadership when it was called for. And, historically, Washington has produced that vigor. Despite all the potential roadblocks, the government has usually managed to make laws. A complete treatment of how elected officials have been able to overcome the barriers to lawmaking would require a book of its own. But a couple regularities are particularly noteworthy. First, the present situation confirms that unified party control of government facilitates lawmaking (Binder 2003). Barack Obama's agenda enjoyed much more success during his first two years in office when Democrats held relatively large majorities in both houses of Congress than it did in the next four when the Republicans controlled the House. Overcoming institutional barriers to legislative success is particularly manageable when the majority party has a very large majority of seats in both houses of Congress. Think about the early New Deal Congresses of the 1930s. Periods with large congressional majorities and a president belonging to that party, however, are quite rare in American history. Hence greasing the wheels of the lawmaking apparatus has most often required other means.

A second way to overcome the institutional barriers built into the law-making process is to build cross-party coalitions. The presence of a large number of conservative Southern Democrats from the 1950s through the 1980s, for example, made life easier for Ronald Reagan and other Republican presidents of this era. Especially in the case of Reagan, building publican presidents often involved what Samuel Kernell dubbed “going cross-party coalitions often involved what Samuel Kernell dubbed “going public.” This refers to the president appealing directly to the public for support of his or her program and using that support as leverage to get those in Washington to follow his or her lead. In considering this process, it is important to remember that not all opinions are equally important to legislators. Those from whom they do not expect to receive a vote at election time ought to matter much less than those from whom they expect to receive support. That means that the opinions of Republicans will matter more to Republican members and the opinions of Democrats will matter more to Democratic members. By going over the heads of majority House Democrats and appealing directly to Democrats in the mass public in the early 1980s, Reagan enhanced his ability to pressure Democratic lawmakers to vote for his program even if their first instinct as Democrats might have been to oppose the Republican president (Kernell 1986).

Among all the forces in American political life, the public is one of the few that could plausibly encourage elites to rise above their worst partisan instincts. Indeed, that is one of the reasons that scholars study the American electorate. In a healthy and vibrant republic, the preferences of the people should be reflected in policy outputs made by their representatives (Miller and Stokes 1962). Hence understanding what ordinary Americans want and why they want it is an important endeavor. Reassuringly, scholars have found that, at least in the past, lawmakers respond with new laws when public consensus emerges on an issue (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987). When the public mood shifts to the left, those laws tend to be more liberal, and when it shifts to the right, those laws tend to be more conservative (Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2002). The fact that members would seek to satisfy constituent demands is not only normatively reassuring; it also makes electoral sense. Elected officials who wish to be reelected have a powerful incentive to reflect constituents’ preferences, especially those they expect to be part of their reelection constituency. Importantly, when public consensus exists, the reelection constituencies of both majority and minority party politicians support a position.¹³

Few obvious and consistent areas of public consensus on specific policy issues exist today, however (Abramowitz 2012). On the big issues, such as spending on the social safety net, climate change, gay marriage, and many

others, the public appears nearly as hopelessly split as those who govern them. One of the leading suspected sources of public dissensus is elite dissensus. Despite the link between mass preferences and public policy, scholars of public opinion have repeatedly shown that citizens’ *initial* policy preferences are quite sensitive to how their elites talk about politics (Zaller 1992). This implies that citizens’ policy preferences are first *led* by political elites and only later *lead* the decisions of political elites. We would like to think that the relationship between the governed and their governors is largely bottom up: the people start with strong beliefs and preferences about a political matter, and their representatives work to reflect it. This is seldom how the process actually works in the real political world, however.

Instead, public opinion formation tends to be top down. Most Americans do not care much about political matters and do not carry crystallized beliefs in their heads. Doing their jobs, caring for their families, and entertaining themselves occupies far more time and energy than does following political matters. Baseball fans tend to know all nine starters on their favorite team. Only the most devout political junkies (1 percent of the population, according to a recent Pew study) know all nine members of the Supreme Court (Pew Research Center 2010a). Hence most people do not develop their political preferences by thinking long and hard about the ins and outs of each issue and considering how they fit into an overall political philosophy. Instead, they look to their favored elites—heuristics again—to help them fill things in. Those who represent ordinary Americans do think long and hard about the ins and outs of the issue and how they fit together. On most matters, ordinary Americans observe their party elites and parrot as best they can muster the opinions and beliefs expressed by those elites.

This tendency is problematic today because of how polarized party elites are. For Republicans in Washington, Democrats always play the villain, and for Democrats, the reverse is true. Elite polarization breeds problems at the mass level. Recent research suggests that partisanship is so strong today that partisans in the electorate fail to learn certain facts that are inconvenient truths for their party (Jacobson 2006). When they agree on the facts, partisans of different stripes interpret them differently (Gaines et al. 2007). And partisans are swayed by even weak arguments made by their party leaders and reject strong arguments made by the other party in a polarized political environment (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). As a result, rather than countering the polarization in Washington, the public increasingly reinforces it.

Such a set of circumstances renders a going public strategy ineffective. Implicit in the success of a going public strategy is the presence of a fair number of partisans in the electorate who are willing to go along with the other party's president's policy goals. Those are the people the president is trying to activate when he goes public. The polarization of political trust makes finding such people all but impossible. Because almost no out-party partisans trust government these days, few, if any, will be inclined to step outside party orthodoxy to support the president's ideas. As a result, consensus in the public will not tend to form, rendering public opinion something of an inert force in nudging policy makers toward action. Political elites now lack the potentially critical push from the public that might cause them to rise above the polarization that infects Washington. The fact that trust in government is both historically low and more polarized by party than ever before explains why Washington does not work in the early twenty-first century. In the end, problems remain unresolved; a governing crisis persists.

On Causation: A Note about Our Multimethod Approach

Among the most vexing problems in the study of mass politics since the inception of survey research has been establishing causation—knowing what causes what. The earliest forays into the field occurred before the advent of scientific polling methods. Hence they relied on aggregate-level election outcome data. V. O. Key's (1955) work on realignment is an example of this kind of work at its best. By examining changes in precinct-level voting results in heavily Catholic areas during Herbert Hoover's two presidential elections, Key demonstrated that the earthquake election of 1932 actually had its roots in 1928 when the Democrats nominated Al Smith, the first major-party Catholic candidate, for president. Heavily Catholic precincts, which were often resolutely Republican before 1928, voted more for the Democrats starting in 1928. This process only accelerated in 1932.

The problem with making inferences about individuals with aggregate-level data is that researchers cannot be certain that individuals from the hypothesized group are actually the ones who changed their behavior. This leads to the so-called ecological inference problem. Returning to the example from Key's work, was it really Catholics who voted more Democratic in 1928, or was it instead non-Catholics who lived in a

predominantly Catholic precinct? Theories of social identity tell us that it was almost certainly Catholics, with a Catholic candidate topping the Democratic ticket. But without knowing both the religion and the voting behavior of specific *individuals* during this time period, Key could not know for certain.

In our view, the best way to demonstrate causation convincingly is to employ multiple methods, which we do throughout the book. Pairing individual-level survey data analysis with the results from aggregate-level analysis is our first step. In chapter 3, we use aggregate-level data to show that trust increases when the percentage of Americans focused on international issues grows. Based on these results, however, we cannot conclude that specific types of individuals trust government more when international issues are salient to them. We can only conclude that a focus on international issues increases trust. Fortunately, we have available to us individual-level survey data. Those data allow us to show that the specific individuals who identify international issues as most important to them also express more trust in the government than those who identify domestic policy issues as most important.

Although individual-level data are helpful, they are not a magic bullet in demonstrating causation. Establishing causality using cross-sectional survey data—these are data that are collected at one specific time—is always tricky business. Based solely on the analysis of cross-sectional data, we cannot conclusively assert that variable *x* is a cause of variable *y*. Statistically, the best we can show is that a correlation exists. It is possible that variable *y* is actually a cause of variable *x*. To establish causal ordering, we can build a *verbal theory* that suggests a certain set of causal dynamics. And we can use statistical controls to account for other potential causes of variable *y* in addition to variable *x*, which will give us more confidence that any correlation we find between *x* and *y* actually exists and is not spurious. However, cross-sectional data alone do not allow researchers to establish a clear temporal ordering of variables—that is, what comes first and what comes second—because all the potential *x*'s and *y*'s are collected at the same time.

Panel data can help researchers make stronger claims about causation than cross-sectional data allow. By panel data, we mean that the *same* survey respondents are asked questions at multiple points in time. Because panel data are expensive and difficult to collect, they are rare in the social sciences. Fortunately, the ANES has carried out panel studies several times in the sixty-plus years it has been doing academic surveys.

When possible, we employ such data throughout the book as a means of establishing causation. For example, in chapter 4, we use panel data to demonstrate that Republicans and Democrats weighted the importance of different performance evaluations differently, thus producing a polarization of political trust in the early 2000s. Panel data allow us to account for how much trust people expressed in 2000, how much these same people expressed in 2002, and what evaluations intervened between these two times to explain the change that occurred (or didn't occur) between these two measurements.

Unfortunately, even panel data do not solve all the problems of causation. Sometimes the panel waves are so far apart that a multitude of factors, some that either could not be or were not measured, intervened to cause change in y . Or, it could be that common tests of causation in the analysis of panel data yield results that suggest causal dynamics more complicated than x causes y or y causes x . Both potential problems suggest the need for still other means of establishing causation.

We therefore turn at times to nonsurvey-based methods to make our case. Specifically, we employ experimental methods, an increasingly popular avenue for hypothesis testing in political science. Experiments are useful for addressing questions of causality because they allow researchers to carefully control or manipulate the effects of independent variables. If an explanatory variable is truly the cause of a dependent variable, then a manipulation of the independent variable should produce a change in the value of the dependent variable. An experiment allows a researcher not only to manipulate the independent variable in question but also to hold constant the effects of other possible independent variables through randomization.

We employ experimental methods in two ways. In chapter 5, for example, we bring subjects into a lab and manipulate issue attention by having randomly chosen groups read news stories about selected issues. Immediately after reading these stories, we ask subjects how much they trust government. This allows us to control what issues people are thinking about at the particular moment that they express their political trust. This, in turn, allows us to demonstrate that making different issues salient has the potential to change not only how much trust people express but also what policy preferences trust affects. Although experiments have limited external validity, we are able to overcome these shortcomings by pairing these results with those in chapter 6, which demonstrates the same process at work using the ANES's cumulative data collection over decades.

Of course, these data are limited in their internal validity for many of the reasons we have articulated above, which the use of our experiment helps us to overcome.

The second way we use experiments is to embed them in national probability samples, taking advantage of the positive qualities of both surveys and experiments at the same time. Specifically, in chapter 9, we conduct a simple survey experiment in which we explore the pliability of political trust. Of central interest in the experiment is the question of whether those who initially distrust government can be persuaded to trust government by receiving additional information. After collecting pretest measurements of political trust, we randomly assign distrustful respondents to receive information about government's (1) efficiency, (2) programmatic benefits, or (3) regulatory protections. We then collect a posttest measure of political trust. The experiment is designed to show whether respondents can be persuaded to trust government and, if so, which types of arguments are most persuasive. In sum, our multimethod approach is designed to increase confidence in the causal inferences that we make throughout the book about the sources and consequences of political trust. Critics might not like one or another of the methods that we use to buttress our argument. Hopefully, the fact that multiple methods all tell a similar story will help mollify their concerns.