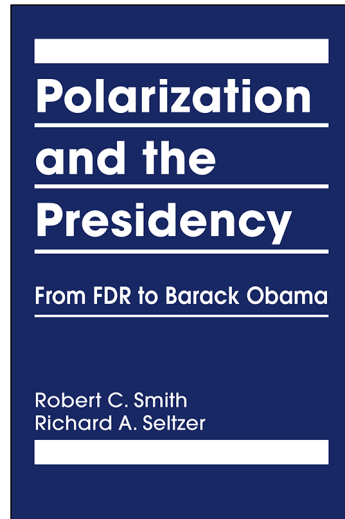


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**Polarization  
and the Presidency:  
From FDR to Barack Obama**

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# 1

## Polarization and the Presidency

**Polarization is one of the most important academic and substantive problems in US politics.** The Democratic and Republican Parties, it is generally agreed, are more polarized at the start of the twenty-first century than they have been at any time since the start of the twentieth century. In the past couple of decades, political science has devoted much research to explaining the origins and consequences of this latest episode in the polarization of the polity. A lacuna in this research is the absence of systematic research on the role of presidents and presidential candidates in polarizing US politics. Most of the research has been conducted on Congress, with a consensus that the parties in Congress began to polarize in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There is a good deal of research and a near consensus on the role of race and the realignment of the South in the origins of the polarization. Beyond this the research becomes varied and contentious, with scholars focusing on the role of party activists, the electorate, the “engaged” public, interest groups, think tanks, intellectuals, and the partisan media.

We take a different approach, focusing on the role of presidents and presidential candidates. Our main argument is that presidents and presidential candidates in their ideologies, rhetoric, and policies have played a far greater role in polarizing US politics than the literature suggests. We show that the contemporary polarized polity consists mainly of the stories of the presidencies of Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan and the presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and George McGovern.

We also focus on issues and policies. In much of the literature there is little systematic attention to the role of issues and policies in the origins and consequences of polarization, except for the “culture wars” about abortion, guns, God, and gays. While these social-moral issues are important, and

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since the 1970s have received a lot of scholarly and media attention, we believe that, as regards the polarization of the polity, they are largely epiphenomenal. At the center of the polarized polity are what we call “ultimate issues” between liberals and conservatives—taxes and national health insurance. Legacies of the New Deal, these issues constitute the basis of the polarized politics anchored by the presidencies of FDR and Reagan.

Liberalism in the United States, until FDR “captured” or “co-opted” the label, was conservatism.<sup>1</sup> This “classical” liberalism, as distinct from FDR’s “modern” liberalism, celebrated individualism, limited government, the primacy of property rights, local autonomy, and states’ rights. This “conservative liberalism” also celebrated the negative state, where the proper functions of government are to protect private property, enforce contracts, exercise the police power, provide for the common defense, and then leave free citizens alone.

Roosevelt changed all of this by redefining the label to mean that the proper functions of government also included regulation of the economy and the provision of welfare in the form of employment, health, housing, and income. Perhaps understanding that these reforms were a break with tradition and knowing for sure that they would be labeled un-American, Roosevelt adopted the liberal label, referring in his 1932 acceptance speech to the Democrats as the “bearers of liberalism.”<sup>2</sup> Herbert Hoover and the old-guard classical liberals were outraged at Roosevelt’s maneuver, insisting they were the true liberals and Roosevelt’s New Deal was socialism, or even communism. By the 1940s, however, classical liberals had resigned themselves to FDR’s capture of the label and began to call themselves conservatives, and to assert that conservatism was superior to liberalism because it reflected traditional values of liberty, individualism, and limited government. However, we have no direct evidence whether respondents in polls choosing between the labels in the 1930s understood this substantive meaning.

The first direct evidence of the substantive content of the labels was provided by Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril in their 1967 book *The Political Beliefs of Americans: A Study of Public Opinion*. The book, based on a 1964 Gallup survey specifically designed to explore the substantive meaning of the labels, found that at the ideological level, most Americans adhered to the ideas of classical liberalism, or what in 1964 Barry Goldwater was vigorously espousing as conservatism. However, at the operational level, or in terms of specific policies, they found that most Americans were New Deal liberals. Among those who identified as conservative, only a third were conservative operationally and 40 percent were liberals. This discrepancy between American ideological beliefs and policy preferences was so large that Free and Cantril described it as “almost schizoid.”<sup>3</sup>

More recent work confirms Free and Cantril’s central finding: Americans continue to be ideologically conservative and operationally liberal.<sup>4</sup> As

Marc Hetherington writes, on the basic programs of the New Deal–Great Society there is little evidence the public has become more conservative since the 1960s or even the 1980s, except on race. Indeed, “public opposition to government is focused entirely on programs that require political majorities to make sacrifices for political minorities, such as antipoverty and race-targeted initiatives.”<sup>5</sup>

The findings of this recent research suggest that the substantive content of the liberal label has changed since FDR. When Roosevelt captured the label it had essentially one dimension, the New Deal regulatory-welfare state. As we will show, FDR’s liberalism conspicuously did not apply to race. In the 1960s under Kennedy and Johnson, liberalism became identified with civil rights and race, and related issues such as crime and poverty. Thus, since the 1960s, when some respondents select an ideological label, they may be thinking of the race dimension rather than traditional New Deal liberalism. Race has always been at the center of white Americans’ political beliefs,<sup>6</sup> and it is clear that this issue more than any other is the principal cause of the decline in liberal self-identification among whites since the New Deal.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the social or moral issues of religion, abortion, feminism, and sexuality became a third ideological dimension. Finally, there was always a defense and foreign policy dimension. After FDR captured the label, liberalism became associated with an expansive role for the United States in international affairs, whereas conservatives favored limited military spending and isolationism. During the Vietnam War there was an ideological flip-flop: liberalism became associated with less military spending, and neo-isolationism and conservatism became associated with increased spending and a more interventionist role in world affairs.

In choosing an ideological label, individuals at different times may be thinking of different dimensions of ideology, or the four dimensions for some respondents may also have merged into a single dimension. That is, as the polity has increasingly polarized, a degree of constraint or coherence among the dimensions may have emerged.

Race is central to our understanding of the development of partisan and ideological polarization, and is itself a major axis of polarization. Therefore, we examine race-specific or civil rights issues spanning the presidencies of FDR to Obama. For the Roosevelt administration, we had only a couple of questions to select for analysis; however, for the Truman administration through Obama’s, the number of questions increases steadily, with a particularly sharp increase beginning in the 1960s. Thus, after the 1960s, we had a relatively large number of questions to select for analysis. We employed several criteria of choice.

First, we selected salient public policy issues (or in some cases events) under consideration during each administration. Some of these issues are

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specific or unique to a particular presidency, but we tried to select other issues that extend beyond a particular presidency and recur over an extended period of time. This allows for study of opinion in different contexts and observation of the dynamics of change. On one issue—equal access to employment—we can trace opinion from Truman through the 1970s. Similarly, we trace school desegregation opinion from the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision in 1954 to the school busing controversy of the 1970s. We also examine two issues—interracial sexual intimacy or marriage, and willingness to vote for an African American for president—that may be described as symbolic indicators of the willingness of whites to fully integrate blacks into the society and polity. “Sex,” Gunnar Myrdal wrote, becomes the symbolic “principle around which the whole structure of segregation of the Negroes—down to disenfranchisement and denial of equal opportunities on the labor market—is organized. . . . The ban on intermarriage and other sex relations involving white women and colored men takes precedence before everything else. It is the end for which the other restrictions are arranged as means.”<sup>8</sup>

In the 1940s, Ralph Bunche wrote that it was inconceivable that an African American could ever become president; a governor, a senator, a general, a cabinet officer perhaps, but never president.<sup>9</sup> Polling on the willingness of Americans to vote for a black for president began in 1958. We examine the attitudinal record on this question from that time until the election of the first black president in 2008.

FDR created the liberal state in America, establishing a new baseline for domestic policy debate. This new baseline dealt with the power of the federal government in relationship to the creation, maintenance, and extension of the welfare state. The power or size of the federal government is related to the federal budget. Before FDR, the orthodoxy of the balanced budget going back to Jefferson had been central to limiting the power of the federal government. Iwan Morgan writes that balanced budgets signaled “popular willingness and ability to limit the purpose and size of government, to restrain its influence on the economy, to protect states’ rights, to maintain the Constitution’s balance of powers and to protect Republican virtue.”<sup>10</sup> FDR, reluctantly and ambivalently, broke with this tradition. Although he did not formally embrace the new economics of John Maynard Keynes, in his policies he established a new orthodoxy in which the budget would be used as a tool to manage the economy—specifically to stimulate it to avoid mass unemployment while maintaining price stability and the value of the currency in a growth economy that in turn could finance the growth of the welfare state. This necessarily would become the axis of bitter ideological conflict between the new liberals and the old-guard traditionalist conservatives.

Financing the growth of the welfare state requires a relatively high, progressive income tax. Opposition to the progressive income tax has

“permeated the Republican Party virtually since its inception.”<sup>11</sup> Gilded-era Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge Sr., in words that Ronald Reagan would echo half a century later, expressed this opposition when he exclaimed that the “confiscation of property under the guise of taxation was . . . vindictive, . . . punish[ing] a man simply because he has succeeded and has accumulated property by thrift and intelligence and character, or has inherited it honestly under the law, is entering upon a dangerous path . . . from the imposition of a tax to the pillage of a class.”<sup>12</sup> Although progressives in the Republican Party for a time challenged this old-guard orthodoxy, hostility to the progressive income tax was dominant in the party until the New Deal.<sup>13</sup> After the New Deal, the old guard in effect became a minority faction in the Republican Party as the ascendant moderates and liberals acquiesced to the New Deal notion of using the income tax to finance the welfare state, and modestly redistribute income to maintain the basic features of a modern capitalist economy. This acquiescence or accommodation of the Republican Party ended in 1964 when the old guard recaptured control of the party and elected Reagan in 1980. Thereafter, old-guard hostility to taxes and the welfare state became the new orthodoxy of the Republican Party, and eventually a major source of the polarization of the presidency.

Related to taxes is the other ultimate division between liberalism and conservatism—the expansion of the welfare state to include national health insurance. This issue is ultimately symbolic of the penultimate debate about taxes and the power of the federal government. But, unlike the abstractions of the tax code, health insurance involves intimate issues that touch directly on the individual efficacy and sense of well-being of every American. Thus, as a symbol it has taken precedence over virtually every other issue in the polarization of the presidency.

We use this issue as the penultimate case study in the polarization of US politics, tracing its origins and development from FDR to Obama. Although not as central as taxes, or as deep, divisive, emotional, and historic as the issue of race in US politics, the struggle over national health insurance since FDR has been in a class by itself as an issue almost certain to divide the public and polarize its leadership.

Race, however, is central to understanding the origins of the contemporary polarization, because it is central in the realignment of the South, which in turn is central in the polarization of the polity. There is something of a paradox with respect to both race and region. The parties are not and generally have not been polarized on race, but race polarized the parties. Similarly, region (South-North) in general has not and does not polarize the parties, but region is the source of the polarization of the parties. In other words, while the United States is a racially polarized polity, race issues generally are not a source of partisan or ideological polarization. And while

the realignment of the South was mainly based on race, the regions generally are not polarized on race or on the ultimate issues.

Our study of polarization proceeds along these three dimensions—the role of presidents and presidential candidates, the role of issues (race, taxes, and health insurance), and how these are manifested in opinion differences between white liberals and conservatives, white Democrats and Republicans, whites and blacks, and southern and non-southern whites.

The book is an attitudinal history, focusing on the presidency from FDR to Obama. In breaking with the tradition of limited, laissez-faire government and establishing the liberal regulatory-welfare state, FDR is the first modern polarizing president. Serendipitously, Roosevelt's presidency coincides with the beginning of scientific polling, allowing us to conduct the attitudinal history. As explained in the appendix to the book, polarization is indicated when differences in presidential approval or on the issues are greater than 40 percentage points between blacks and whites, white Democrats and Republicans, white liberals and conservatives, and white southerners and non-southerners. Among whites, Roosevelt's partisan difference score during his tenure averaged 58; a partisan difference score approaching this level among whites is not seen again until Reagan's presidency. Among blacks, FDR's partisan difference score averaged 40; a partisan difference score this high in presidential approval among blacks has never been seen again. Reliable ideological data are not available during Roosevelt's tenure, but he was not a racially or regionally polarizing president.

Although Roosevelt was a partisan polarizer, the Congress throughout his tenure was not polarized. This is because both parties included factions of conservatives and liberals, and the period from Roosevelt's first Congress (73rd, 1933–1934) until the 92nd Congress (1971–1972) represented a period of depolarized, bipartisan consensus politics. After Roosevelt, there was generally a period of depolarized convergence in presidential approval as both parties nominated and elected presidents who accepted the broad outlines of what might be called the Roosevelt settlement. This depolarized consensus began to come apart in 1964 when the Republican Party for the first time since FDR's election nominated an old-guard "movement" conservative who rejected the Roosevelt settlement. Although Barry Goldwater was decisively defeated, his forces seized control of the party. The Goldwater faction contributed to the polarization of the Congress beginning in the late 1960s. In 1980 the now dominant Goldwater faction nominated one of its own and immediately repolarized the presidency. Except for the one-term depolarized presidency of George H. W. Bush, the presidency has been polarized since then. At the end of Obama's first term, his partisan difference score among whites averaged 70.

Goldwater's nomination and the 1972 nomination by the Democrats of George McGovern contributed to the polarization of activists in both parties



and to polarization of the Congress. The multiple campaigns of George Wallace accelerated the process, and the 1994 “Gingrich” midterm elections and the 2010 “Tea Party” midterm elections completed the process. As others have reported, polarization is asymmetrical. The Republican Party is much more ideologically right-wing than the Democratic Party is ideologically left-wing. Democratic Party activists since McGovern have moved substantially to the left on cultural issues and somewhat to the left on race issues, but on the ultimate issues of taxes and health insurance or the welfare state generally they are no further left today than when FDR died. Meanwhile, the Republicans have abandoned the Eisenhower-Nixon acceptance of the Roosevelt settlement and returned to the ideology of Calvin Coolidge.

This is the history told in this book, an attitudinal history of polarization from the axis of the presidency, and taxes and health insurance portrayed in terms of ideology, party, race, and region.<sup>14</sup> For political scientists, survey data “takes the place of the historian’s trail of documents as a source of understanding some period of history or some major event.”<sup>15</sup> The historical period in this work is the near eight decades from FDR’s election to the end of Obama’s first term. The major events are the polarization, depolarization, and repolarization of US politics.

We proceed chronologically with chapters on each president from FDR to Obama, excluding Gerald Ford.<sup>16</sup> After a chapter on the polarizing Roosevelt presidency, we look at the depolarized presidency from Truman to Carter. In these chapters, we show how these presidents, while often divisive and unpopular, did not polarize, because they more or less accepted the Roosevelt settlement. This is followed by chapters on the polarizing Reagan presidency and the compromising, prudential, depolarized George H. W. Bush presidency, and then chapters on the polarized Clinton presidency and the near hyperpolarized presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. In order to tell the full story, it is necessary to look not just at these twelve presidents, but also at the three failed presidential campaigns of Wallace, Goldwater, and McGovern. In Chapters 7 and 9, we examine these campaigns in order to show how they were integral to the repolarization of the presidency and US politics.

Presidential candidates, even when they lose, can sometimes play important roles in defining and reshaping ideology and in disrupting and shaping party coalitions. They can also mobilize and energize party activists, who in turn may have more enduring consequences for the parties, policy, politics, and ideology. We show how Wallace, Goldwater, and McGovern played these roles in the origins of the contemporary polarization.

Presidents are certainly constrained by the separated systems of power and the political context in which they are elected, but everyone who studies US politics agrees that the presidency has more influence in shaping

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political beliefs, policies, and ethos than does any other part of the political system. Even those who limit the powers of the office to persuasion agree that a president's power to persuade is greater than that of any other actor in the system. Thus there is an enormous gap in the literature, which this book seeks to begin to close.

### Notes

1. Ronald Rotunda, "The 'Liberal' Label: Roosevelt's Capture of a Symbol," *Public Policy* 17 (1968): 337–348.

2. Roosevelt rejected the progressive label because of its past identification with Republicans; Herbert Hoover in 1932 was labeled a progressive and, of course, FDR's cousin, "Teddy," a Republican, had been a leading voice of the progressives.

3. Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril, *The Political Beliefs of Americans: A Study of Public Opinion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967), p. 37.

4. Christopher Ellis and James Stimson, *Ideology in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

5. Marc Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Trust and the Demise of Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 4.

6. In his classic essay on ideology in the United States, Phillip Converse, using data from the 1950s, concluded: "For the bulk of the mass public, the object with the highest centrality is the visible familiar population grouping [Negroes] rather than abstract relations among parts of government." Phillip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Public," in David Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 238.

7. K. Elisabeth Coggins and James Stimson, "Understanding the Decline of Liberal Self-Identification in America," manuscript, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of Political Science, 2013.

8. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1944, 1962), p. 587. For a detailed historical investigation of Myrdal's proposition, see Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

9. Ralph Bunche, *A Brief and Tentative Analysis of Negro Leadership*, edited by Jonathan Holloway (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 36.

10. Iwan Morgan, *The Age of Deficits: Presidents and Unbalanced Budgets from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), p. 15.

11. Sheldon Pollack, *Refinancing America: The Republican Anti-Tax Agenda* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 3.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

14. More than 3,000 polls and surveys from 1936 to 2012 were used in this history. In the appendix to the book, we discuss the multiple problems in studying presidential approval and opinion on issues over this long period of time. We also discuss derivation of our 40-point baseline for measuring polarization.

15. Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeth, and Lawrence Bobo, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 207.

16. Partly because of space, but mainly because of its brevity and relative insignificance in understanding polarization, we exclude the Ford presidency. Ford, however, fits comfortably within the pattern of post-FDR depolarized presidents. Ideological data are not available, but his white partisan difference score was 30, his racial difference score was 21, and his regional difference score among whites was 1.