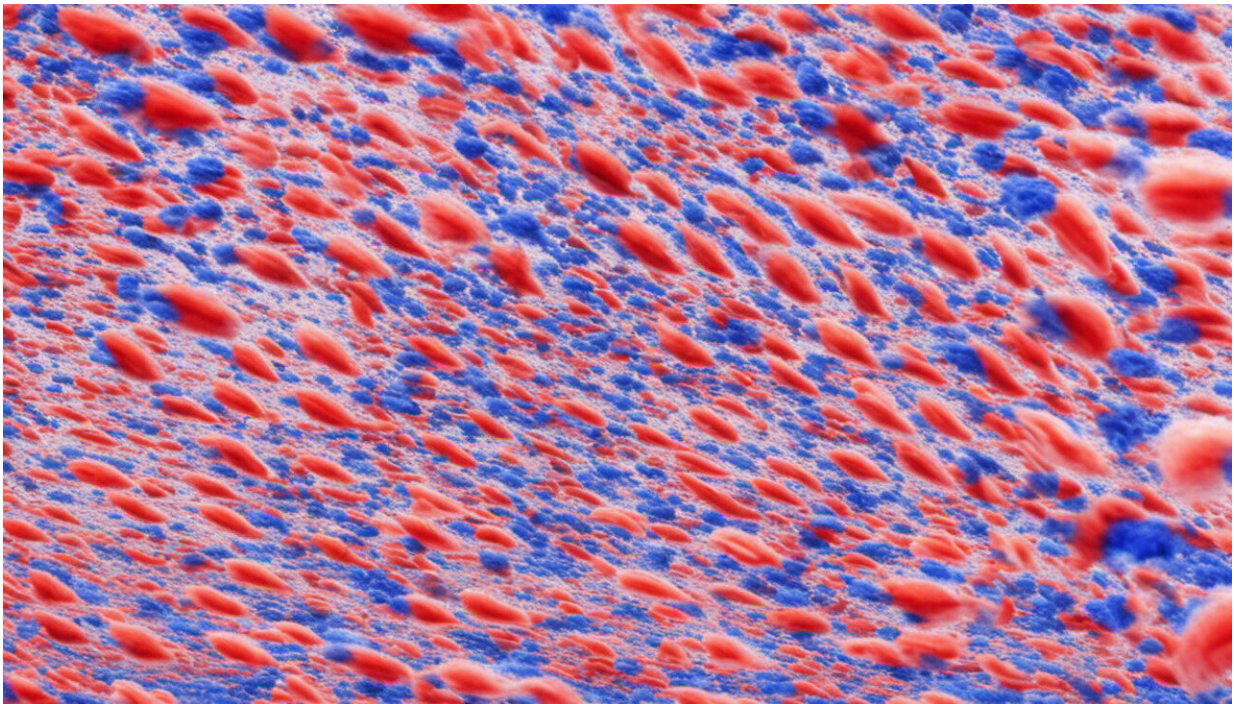


# U.S. political parties more polarized than voters

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Despite widespread perceptions of rising political polarization in the United States, the American public is no more polarized than it was before the Reagan era, according to a Stanford scholar.

Morris Fiorina, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, studies

elections and [public opinion](#). He recently published the book, [Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting and Political Stalemate](#), which draws on his prior research and a variety of new data on the American electorate. He is also the Wendt Family Professor of Political Science.

The Stanford News Service recently interviewed Fiorina about the topic:

## **Are voters more polarized than ever?**

No. Although pundits and politicians make that claim every day, it's not true. If we take the electorate as a whole – without slicing it by partisanship, region or anything else – the public doesn't look any different than it did in 1976.

Polarization is the grouping of opinion around two extremes. No matter how we measure public opinion, this has not happened. In 2016, more Americans classified themselves as moderates than as liberals or conservatives; moreover, the numbers are virtually identical to those registered in 1976. The distribution of partisan identification flatly contradicts the polarization narrative: self-classified Republicans are no larger a proportion of the public than in the Eisenhower era, while self-identified Democrats are a significantly smaller proportion than in the 1960s. Forty percent of today's public declines to identify with either [party](#).

Positions on specific issues support the same conclusion – the public favors a middle ground between the parties. On abortion, for example, the Democratic platform position is "any time, for any reason," while the Republican position is "never, no exceptions." The public says "sometimes, for some reasons."

## **What is causing our current political turbulence?**

A process that is widely mistaken for polarization: what political scientists call "party sorting." The overall distribution of public opinion has not changed, but specific dimensions of it have become more highly correlated with partisanship. When I was in graduate school there were liberal Republican presidential candidates and U.S. senators and representatives. There were conservative Democratic presidential candidates and U.S. senators and representatives. Environmental protection was not a partisan issue in the early 1970s. Even in the 1980s, there were Democratic members of Congress who were pro-gun, and Republican members who were pro-choice. Today the issues align with partisanship and ideology – there has been a significant decline in cross-cutting cleavages, to use the older sociological terminology.

We can call this "partisan polarization" as long as we don't forget that there is still a big middle ground that is not part of it.

## **What are the consequences of "party sorting"?**

A lot of the things that reasonable people complain about. A common complaint is that the two parties don't work together to solve our country's problems. It's difficult when the most liberal Republican in Congress is more conservative than the most conservative Democrat, as is the case today. And that's true across many issues. A generation ago, Republicans and Democrats who were opposed to each other on one issue might be allies on another issue. That's much less likely today. Another consequence is the geographic sorting of the parties. The Democratic base lies in the urban coastal states, while the Republican base lies in the Southern and Midwestern states.

In 1976 the Democrats nominated a "born again" Sunday school teacher (Jimmy Carter) from Georgia and the Republicans a country club moderate (Jerry Ford) from Michigan. Ford carried California and Connecticut. Carter carried Texas and Mississippi. It's hard to imagine

that today.

What reinforces the difficulty of working together is the close party balance. Neither party enjoys majority support. Control of our national institutions flips back and forth. As University of Maryland political scientist Frances Lee documents, the congressional parties will reverse long-held policy positions rather than allow the other party to achieve legislative success. Winning control, not solving the country's problems, is the primary goal.

## **What is the role of media, polls, swing voters and independents in the rise of populism or other political movements?**

In my book, I argue that the current electoral instability reflects the fact that we have two highly sorted parties, each of which tries to impose its narrow vision on a big, heterogeneous country. After winning office, a party attempts to enact the priorities and positions of its base, which is not why the marginal voters supported it. In the next election, some of the latter defect to the other party. Consider 2016 from the standpoint of a moderate, unattached voter. She has seen a Republican administration take the country into two interminable wars and preside over two economic crashes. Then she sees a Democratic administration fail to jail any of the miscreants responsible for the great crash, preside over a slow and uneven recovery and compile a less than stellar record in foreign affairs. Maybe, she wonders, these "experts" don't know as much as they think they do. Let's try something different. The fact that the so-called experts frequently tend to condescend to the broader public reinforces the allure of the outsider.

## **Are political parties stronger or weaker today than previously?**

There's no single answer to that question. Clearly the ability of the legislative parties to enforce cohesion is much greater than a generation ago. On the other hand, the ability of the party to control nominations is probably lower than a generation ago. In 2016, Donald Trump rolled the Republican Party establishment and Bernie Sanders knocked the Democratic establishment on its heels. What is a party today? Parties are much more multifaceted than they used to be – not just party and government officials and a few big interest groups, but also donor networks, campaign consultants and pollsters, and issue activists.

### **Any other key points you'd like to address?**

Citizens should realize that nearly everyone featured in the political media is "abnormal" (in a statistical sense, but probably in other senses as well). The sorting process I have described is much more evident among the small minority that is most politically involved; most Americans are not, but these normal Americans are not the ones featured in the media. Bear in mind that less than 2 percent of the eligible electorate subscribes to the New York Times. About 1 percent of the electorate watches Fox News or Stanford's Rachel Maddow in the evening.

If you're one of those who watch Anderson Cooper on CNN (and I imagine that a lot of people reading this are), consider that about the same number of Americans at about the same time are watching Yogi Bear re-runs on Nick at Nite (admittedly, some of those viewers are too young to vote).

As always, most Americans are working, raising their families and otherwise going about their daily lives, not paying much attention to the political wars being fought by political elites.

Provided by Stanford University

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