Culture wars, voting, and polarization: divisions and unities in modern American politics

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Red state vs. blue state. Gun-owning, churchgoing, conservative Republicans in the heartland vs. liberal, secular, gay-friendly Democrats in coastal cities. Rich voter vs. poor voter. SUV-driving stockbroker vs. waitress mom.

Economic polarization has traditionally been a focus of the political left, with cultural polarization being a weapon on the right. Recent debates in political science and in general political discourse can be understood from this perspective. We attempt to advance the discussion by applying modern statistical methods to analyze voting and partisanship, attitudes on clusters of issues, and polarization in the social network.

These notes accompany my talk at Dartmouth College on 12 Oct 2007; see the slides at http://www.stat.columbia.edu/~gelman/research/presentations/dartmouth.ppt

Culture wars and polarization

- Pundits, political scientists, and the general public all worry about polarization

- The story:

  - 1950s and before: good old days of strong parties
  - 1960s–1970s: T.V. and suburbanization weaken party ties
  - 1990s–2000s: polarization

- The implicit story: why do the Democrats lose elections?

- Aspects of polarization

  - Polarized politics (the red team vs. the blue team)
  - Polarization on issues (abortion, immigration, Iraq)
  - Social polarization (horizontal rather than vertical connections)

Red America and Blue America

- The paradox

  - Rich states go for the Democrats, poor states go for the Republicans
  - But ...rich *voters* go for the Republicans
  - Pundits get confused: Maryland, Texas, and Kansas

- Resolving the paradox and introducing new complications

  - Income is strongly associated with Republican voting in poor states but not in rich states

  - Income-voting pattern is strongest among regular churchgoers

- Political divisions between rich and poor, religious and non-religious, vary by state

- The asymmetry of considering elite Democrats or elite Republicans

Polarization in issue attitudes

- The puzzle

  - Voters, pundits complain about "polarization"

  - Democratic and Republican parties have moved apart

  - But ...on issues, voters are no more polarized than before

- Fiorina's story

  - Parties have moved apart

  - Voters perceive this and have more polarized views about the parties

  - Individual centrist politicians (George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton) can't overcome the pull of the party activists

- Look at *correlations* between issues

  - With increasing correlations, voters become more polarized

  - Correlations of issue attitudes with party ID or ideology increase 5% per decade

  - Correlations between pairs of issue attitudes increase by only 2% per decade

- Our story follows Fiorina:

  - As the parties move apart, voters sort themselves more cleanly

  - Alignment with parties leads to a small increase in actual polarization of issue attitudes

- How can the parties stay so far apart?

  - Doesn't it make sense to go for the center, where the voters are?

  - Actually, being a centrist is worth about 3% of the vote for an individual congressmember

Learning about social structure using "How many X's do you know?" surveys

- Cool statistical tool:
    - Estimate size of individuals' social networks (and subnetworks)
    - Estimate sizes of subgroups of the population
    - Learn about rare and hard-to-reach groups $(1500 * 750 > 1\text{million})$

- Use overdispersion to learn about structure in the social network

- Potential to learn about Democrats, Republicans, social ties within and between groups, etc.

Summary

- Liberal-to-moderate and moderate-to-conservative voters are (gradually) sorting themselves into Democrats and Republicans

- The Red America vs. Blue America division looks different in different places: income matters in poor states but not in rich states

- Similar patterns in other countries: "red America" looks like Mexico, "blue America" looks like Europe

- The polarization problem isn't about to be solved, but it would help if people avoided hasty generalizations

- Media are misled by trying to squeeze a diverse country into simple us-vs.-them storylines

References

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Tian Zheng, Matthew Salganik, and Andrew Gelman (2006). "How many people do you know in prison?": using overdispersion in count data to estimate social structure in networks. *Journal of the American Statistical Association* **101**, 409–423.

Further references appear in the above papers, all of which can be found at
http://www.stat.columbia.edu/∼gelman/research/