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If Everyone Votes Their Party, Why Do Presidential Election Outcomes Vary So Much?

Daron Shaw, *University of Texas at Austin*

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Abstract

Despite mountains of election returns, opinion surveys, and controlled experiments, political scientists have not offered a particularly compelling explanation for the most important conundrum facing students of U.S. elections: how could we have had such different election results across the past decade when the electorate is so polarized along partisan lines? Relying mostly on data from the American National Election Studies, this article examines the nature of party attachments and presidential voting in the 2000s, with an eye towards estimating the relative importance of persuasion and mobilization for variation in electoral outcomes. I also consider the most obvious source for future party system transformation: the mobilization of Hispanic-American and Asian-American voting cohorts.

The realignment of the New Deal party system in the 1960s and 1970s transformed and renewed the Democratic and Republican parties. Rather than continuing to finesse the racial and social-order issues that dominated the headlines between 1960 and 1975, the parties clarified their positions and went about the business of consolidating their new, more ideologically coherent coalitions (Carmines and Stimson 1987, Petrocik 1981). Echoes of this effort reverberated throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

By the presidential election of 2000, consolidation was largely complete. The socially conservative wing of the Democratic Party—a cornerstone of Franklin Roosevelt’s majority and Harry Truman’s vote in 1948—was gone, replaced by Blacks in the Deep South and Hispanics in the Southwest. The socially liberal wing of the Republican Party—a key component to Richard Nixon’s California base and to the Rockefeller Republicans of the Mid-Atlantic and New England states—was also gone, replaced (in numbers, if not regionally) by white evangelical voters.

This “realignment,” this transformation of the coalitional character of the parties, produced few truly independent voters (Keith et al. 1991) and suggested more polarized campaigns and elections. The news media and punditry, egged on by political scientists and consultants, posited that few voters were any longer persuadable and that contemporary elections were now largely about mobilization of the faithful. Yet this very plausible narrative has run afoul of some disturbing facts.

After a run of mostly predictable midterm elections from 1934 through 2004 (1994 being the notable exception), the 2006, 2008, and 2010 midterm elections saw seat swings of +21 Democratic, +30 Democratic, and +63 Republican. At the presidential level in 2004, George W. Bush received 51% of the popular vote and 286 electoral votes (53% of the total). In 2008, however, Barack Obama received 53% of the popular vote and 365 electoral votes (68% of the total). Obama flipped nine of the fifty states from Bush’s 2004 column—Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Iowa, Florida, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana. An unpopular war and a cratering economy were the proximate explanations for the 2008 election. But political science has been remarkably silent on (1) verifying this conventional wisdom and (2) putting it (or any other explanation) into a broader context.

All of this presents a lacuna and a conundrum: how can a partisan and polarized electorate produce such disparate results? I attack this puzzle by breaking it into bite-sized morsels. In particular, I ask five questions about American voters and presidential elections. First, how important is party to voters and their vote choice? Second, how much “persuasion” occurred in the 2008 presidential election? Third, how much “mobilization” occurred in 2008? Fourth, how polarized are American voters? Fifth and finally, what can we say about the

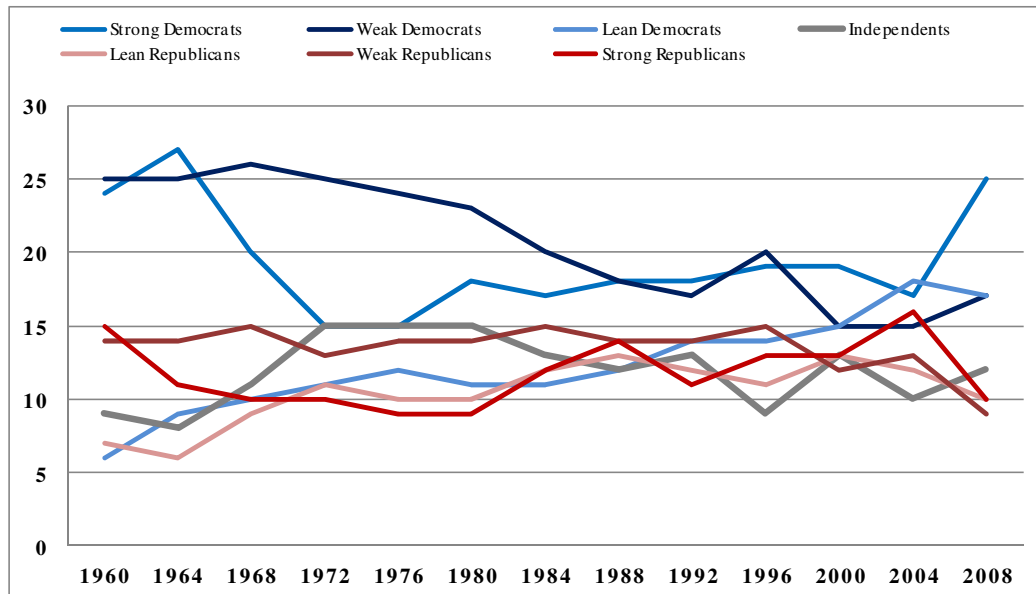
prospects for change? In engaging these questions, I rely mostly on polling data with particular emphasis on the cumulative surveys of the American National Election Study, which afford us a powerful and reliable tool for measuring both contemporaneous attitudes and over-time comparisons.

How Important is Party?

The short answer is that party is as important as ever. Americans today identify as partisans at rates comparable to those in the early 1960s.¹ As demonstrated in Figure 1, in 1960 nine percent of Americans claimed that they did not identify with (or lean towards) one of the major parties. In 2008, it was only twelve percent. The percentage of self-identified independents did rise briefly in 1972 and 1976—presumably in response to Republican defections over President Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate scandal—but this increase was nominal (at most, we see a six-point rise) and short-lived (by 1984 only twelve percent identified as independent). Despite the hue and cry in the late 1980s and early 1990s about the “end of the party” and “dealignment,” the hold of the American parties on voters has been an enduring characteristic of modern U.S. politics.

Although the percentage of independents in the U.S. has been consistently low (even during the realigning era), one major change is evident in the data. The percentage of Americans who initially claim that they do not identify with either party, but do so when asked which way they “lean,” has increased over time. Initially, and as many have pointed out, the percentage of leaning Democrats increased dramatically (from six percent in 1960 to twenty-five percent in 2008) while the percentage of strong Democrats decreased (from about twenty-four percent in 1960 to seventeen in 2008). On the other side of the aisle, seven percent of voters in 1960 identified as “leaning” Republicans; from 1980 through 2004, the average was thirteen percent (it did dip to ten percent in 2008). All told, thirteen percent of Americans claimed that they “leaned” towards one or the other party in 1960, whereas twenty-seven percent did so in 2008.

¹ Party identification is typically measured with two questions. The first asks respondents whether they identify themselves as Democrats, Republicans, or whether they do not think of themselves in this way. Those who identify as partisans are asked whether they think of themselves as “strong” or “not so strong” partisans. Those who say they do not identify with one of the major parties are asked whether they “lean” closer to the Republicans or Democrats. For present purposes, I treat leaning partisans as partisans rather than as independents. This is why I estimate the level of independents at around ten percent, while those who lump leaning independents with “pure” independents estimate the level of independents somewhere between thirty and forty percent.

Figure 1. Partisan Identification, 1960-2008

Source: American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative file, 1952-2008

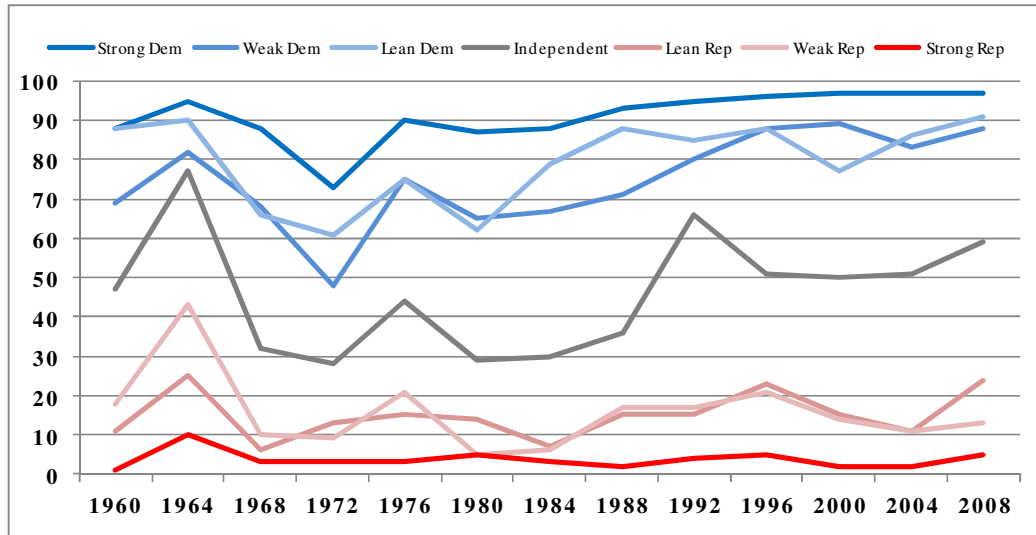
Perhaps even more to the point, the effect of party identification on presidential voting appears to have gotten stronger over time. In Figure 2, we see that party-line voting has increased since 1960. Indeed, the presidential elections of 1964, 1968, and 1972 were marked by relatively high degrees of defection from the losing party's identifiers. In more recent elections, however, defection is minimal. In 1996, for example, twenty-one percent of weak and leaning Republicans and only five percent of strong Republicans voted for the landslide winner, Democrat Bill Clinton.² In 1964, by contrast, thirty-one percent of weak and leaning Republican identifiers and ten percent of strong Republicans cast their ballots for Democrat Lyndon Johnson. In Barack Obama's eight-point victory in 2008, only seventeen percent of weak and leaning Republicans voted for the Democrat, with this percentage dropping to five percent among strong Republicans.

Independents, meanwhile, tend to mimic—even exaggerate—the vote tendencies of the broader electorate. In 1984, seventy percent of their two-party vote went for Ronald Reagan. In 1992, sixty-five percent of their two-party vote went for Bill Clinton. In 2008, Barack Obama claimed fifty-nine percent of their

² These numbers are based on the Democratic share of the two-party vote and thus correct for third party candidates in certain elections.

support. But only one in eight voters is independent: a ten percent surge in support among this segment translates into just over a point of additional support in the electorate writ large.

Figure 2. Democratic Share of the Two-Party Vote for President among Party ID Groups, 1960-2008

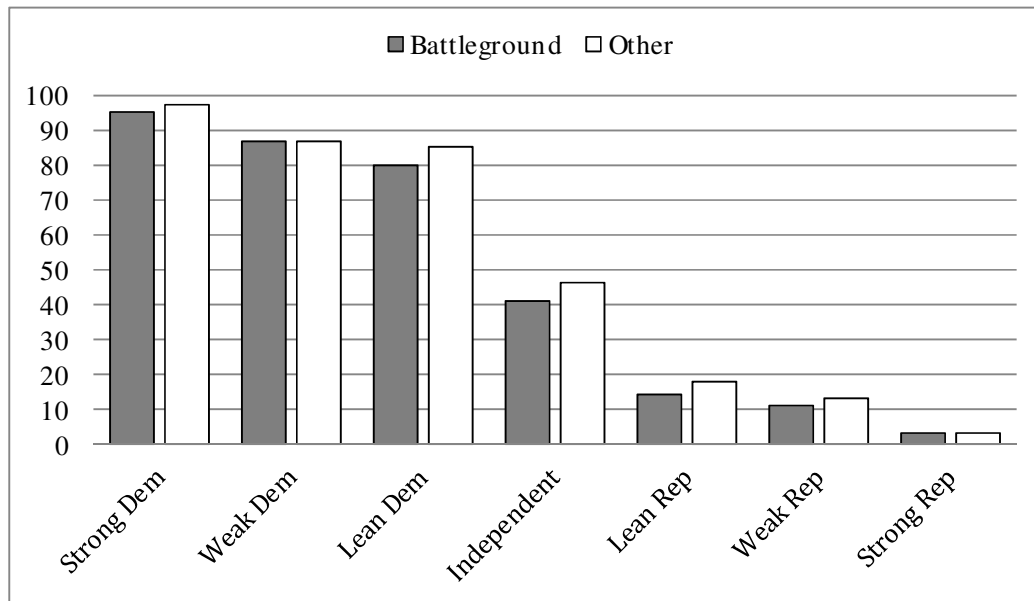


Source: American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative file, 1952-2008

Perhaps defection rates are higher in the battleground states, where presidential campaigning is much more intense? Figure 3 demonstrates that party exerts the same hold over voters in these states as it does in non-battlegrounds. The Democratic vote is very slightly lower in the battleground states—by about two percentage points—but the pattern remains the same as with the overall data.

The data therefore indicate that party identification ought to be a major constraint on both individual- and aggregate-level volatility. In this sense, we have verified the notion that there ought to be some appreciable stability to electoral outcomes in the U.S. So how can we account for the oscillations in recent outcomes? There are, as mentioned earlier, two obvious explanations: (1) the ability of candidates from one side to persuade independents and weaker identifiers to join them (for a short time, at least), and (2) the ability of one side to get more of their partisans to the polls in a given election. The first of these does not seem particularly promising, given the cursory analysis of independent voters offered above. But let us delve more deeply into this possibility before turning our attention to the topic of mobilization.

Figure 3. Democratic Share of the Two-Party Vote by Party ID by Battleground Status, 2000-08



Source: American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative file, 1952-2008

How Much Persuasion Occurred in 2008?

As is evident in the preceding figures, defection rates were historically low in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections. But this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that important persuasive effects existed across these campaigns. The specific question of interest is: what proportion of the ten-point swing between the 2004 election (which George W. Bush won by 2 points) and the 2008 election (which Barack Obama won by 8 points) was due to persuasion?

If one examines the vote by party identification, the greatest Democratic vote gains came amongst leaning Republicans, where Obama out-performed John Kerry by 13 points, and among pure independents, where the improvement was 8 points. Weak and leaning Democrats were 5 points more supportive of the Democrats, while strong partisans and weak Republicans each moved 2 points or less. If the composition of the electorate in 2008 was the same as it had been in 2004, Obama would have bettered Kerry's vote by a little over 2 points. In other words, persuasion was probably sufficient to have accounted for a narrow Obama win in 2008, but little more than that.

Another way to consider Obama's 2008 election is to calculate the "normal vote" for a variety of different social and political groups and to compare these estimates with how Obama actually performed on Election Day. The idea of a normal vote goes back to Philip Converse (1966), although the version I rely on here is based on John Petrocik's (1989) useful take on the concept. The core concept is that partisans can be expected to vote for their party's candidate at predictable rates, and that this predictability offers a chance to gauge particular performance more appropriately. For example, if a Democratic candidate trails her Republican opponent among white evangelicals by 10 points, it is inappropriate to infer that the candidate is doing especially poorly with that group. Indeed, given the structure of party identification among white evangelicals, she may be over-achieving.

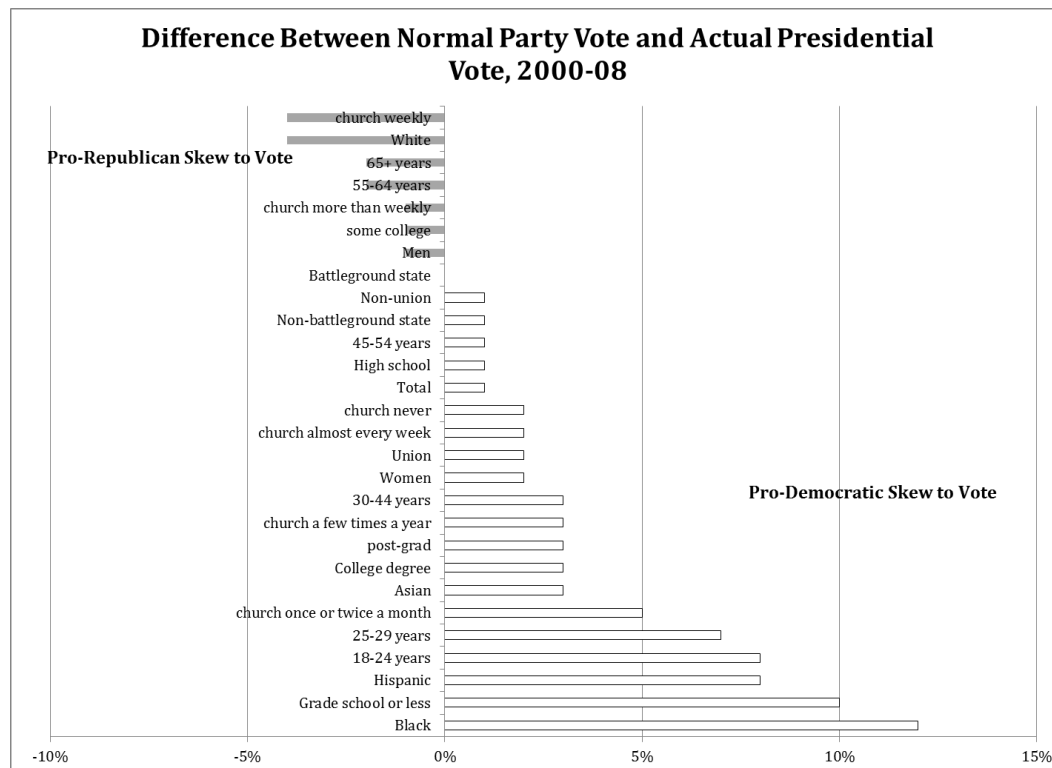
But we cannot assess this unless we take this party identification structure into account. To calculate the normal vote, then, the analyst takes a range of election results into account—some Republican blow-outs, some Democratic blow-outs, and some nail-biters—and estimates the expected vote across party identification categories in an average election, that is, an election with no short-term forces. Then he uses these numbers, along with the percentage of people in the seven different party identification categories (see above), to estimate the normal vote for a given group or electorate. Using the example posed earlier, if we estimate that the normal vote for a Democratic candidate among white evangelicals is 40%, we can say that our candidate is doing pretty well—she is trailing by 10 points with a group that usually goes for the Republican by 20 points. In this way, the normal vote allows us to see persuasive effects in a given election by holding underlying partisan factors constant.

Even after controlling for the effect of party identification, Figure 4 shows that Obama did extraordinarily well with African-Americans (12 points better than the normal vote), those with less than a high school education (12 points better than the normal vote), Latinos (8 points better than the normal vote), and those under 24 years of age (8 points better than the normal vote). The identification of these groups as particularly favorable towards Obama—with the possible exception of Latinos—largely corroborates the conventional wisdom, though with useful context and precision. Note also that all of the groups where Obama "over-achieved" lean to the left or are independent; he did not garner extra support among right-leaning groups. On the other side of the ledger, Republican presidential candidate John McCain failed to score more than four points above the normal vote with any group, though he did manage to beat the normal vote by four points with weekly church-attenders and whites.

In sum, persuasion does seem to have been a factor in Obama's triumph in 2008, but the magnitude of persuasive effects is underwhelming in absolute terms. Moreover, the persuasion was often among those predisposed to support the

Democratic candidate, as Obama managed to bolster his vote by several points mainly among left-leaning groups.

Figure 4. Using the Normal Vote to Estimate Persuasion



Notes: Bars represent the difference between support for the Democratic or Republican candidate and the “normal vote.” The normal vote is the vote one would expect in an election with no short-term forces favoring either party’s candidate (see Petrocik 1989).

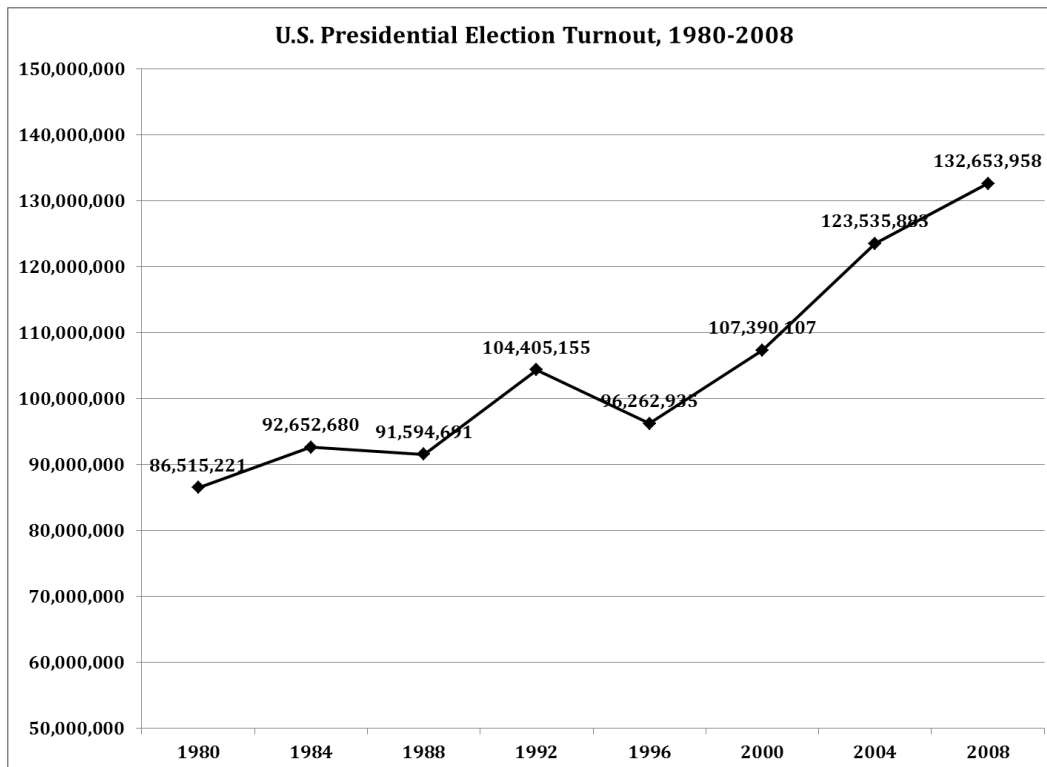
Source: American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative file, 1952-2008

How Much Mobilization Occurred in 2008?

If persuasion accounted for 2-3 points of Obama’s 10-point improvement over Kerry, it seems logical that the remaining 5-6 points were due to mobilization. In many ways, this rough arithmetic fits with some of the broader trends we have seen over the past sixteen years. For example, in raw numbers, we have seen a massive increase in the number of people casting votes in presidential elections since 1996. Figure 5 demonstrates that from 1980 to 1996, presidential turnout increased by about 9 million votes (from 87 million to 96 million), but from 1996

to 2008 turnout increased by 37 million votes (from 96 million to 133 million). This is a 38% increase in twelve years, compared to an 11% increase over the preceding sixteen.

Figure 5. Raw Presidential Election Turnout Increases over Time



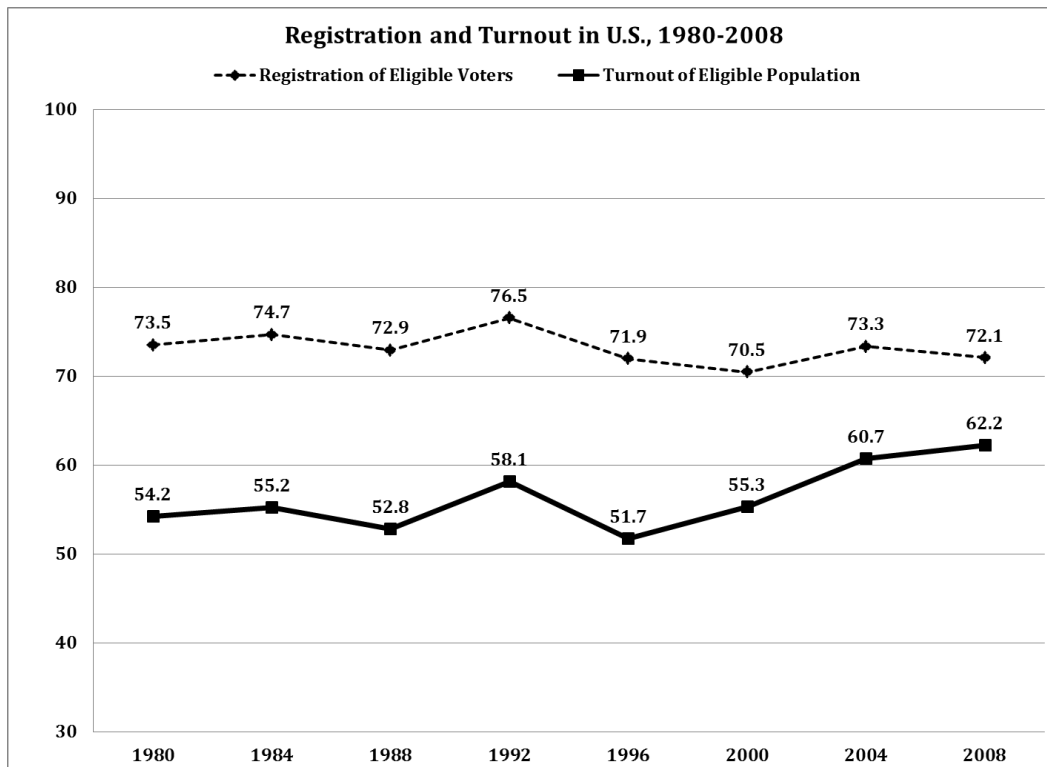
Source: United States Election Project, http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm

The nuts-and-bolts of this trend are worth exploring. In particular, is increased turnout solely due the simple fact that there are more people out there? Or are the candidates and parties also turning out eligible voters at a higher rate? Figure 6 displays registration and turnout rates from 1980 through 2008. The data indicate that registration rates have been roughly flat over the past 38 years, telling us that—despite changes in the registration laws and millions of dollars in registration drives—we are registering the same proportion of the eligible universe (73.5% in 1980 compared to 72.1% in 2008). In this sense, outreach is, at best, keeping up with population increases.

But the data also show that a greater percentage of eligible voters are casting ballots. Turnout fell from 1980 to 1988 (54% in 1980 to 53% in 1988), and then spiked up in 1992 (to 57%), before tumbling in 1996 (to 52%). Since

1996, however, turnout has increased to 55% in 2000, 61% in 2004, and 62% in 2008. So while it is true that there are more Americans than ever, it is also true that the rate of turnout amongst eligible persons has increased by ten points since its nadir in 1996. Thus, the increased number of voters is driven by the more effective mobilization of a growing eligible electorate.

Figure 6. Changes in Registration and Turnout over Time



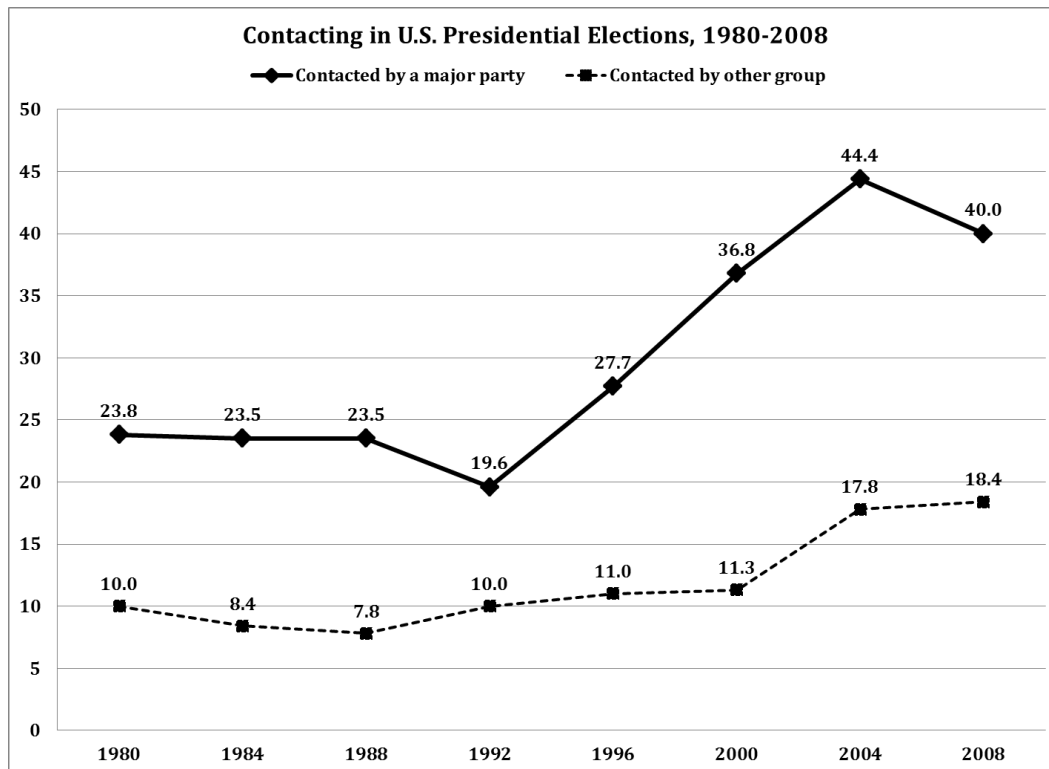
Source: United States Election Project, http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm

Once again, these data are consistent with the narrative offered up in the news media after the 2004 and 2008 elections. This narrative emphasized the renewed efforts on the part of both the Republicans and the Democrats to identify and turn out supportive voters (see Halperin and Harris 2006). More importantly, these data (and the narrative) are backed by additional empirical evidence: in this case, survey data estimating party and candidate contacting efforts.³ Figure 7

³ The exact numbers here are somewhat questionable due to biases in self-reported behavior. Yet these biases ought to be consistent over time, making the differences in the time series consequential.

offers across-time estimates of the percentage of Americans contacted by either of the major parties or their campaigns, as well as the percentage of Americans contacted by other groups in these same elections.

Figure 7. Party and Interest Group Contacting Increases over Time



Source: American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative file, 1952-2008.

From 1980 to 1992, the total percentage of people who report being contacted is essentially unchanged, hovering at about 24%. It dips to 20% in the air-war-driven campaign of 1992, and then begins to rise: to 28% in 1996, to 37% in 2000, and to 44% in 2004, before dropping slightly to 40% in 2008. Even at 40%, this constitutes a doubling of the campaign contact rate from 1992 to 2004. In raw numbers, the increase is staggering: 20% of the 1992 electorate translates to 20.8 million voters contacted, while 40% of the 2008 electorate translates to 53.1 million voters contacted. That is an additional 32.3 million voters contacted. The increased contacting rates reported for outside interest groups mimic this general pattern, albeit at lower percentages—rising from 10% in 1980 to 18% in 2008.

But were there partisan differences in contacting rates between 2004 and 2008 that might explain the pro-Democratic shift? In 2004, 15% of voters say they were contacted by the Democrats only, 12% say they were contacted by the Republicans only, and 16% say they were contacted by both sides. In 2008, those percentages were 19%, 8%, and 13%, respectively. The Democratic contacting edge thus went from +3 to +11 in four years. This sort of analysis is hardly definitive, but it is consistent with the argument that mobilization was a major factor in Obama's 2008 victory.

How Polarized are Voters?

If voters are (mostly) voting their party identification, and mobilization trumps persuasion as an explanation for presidential election volatility, can we assume that the American electorate is increasingly polarized? The short answer is "maybe not." Although the idea of a polarized American electorate is a staple of news media coverage of contemporary politics, there has been a lively debate in politics over the extent to which it is true. On the one hand, the parties have clearly become more ideologically coherent and consistent since the 1960s, with the Republicans and Democrats taking clearer positions on social and racial issues. Voters have slowly changed their underlying allegiances in response to these party shifts. White southerners, for example, have moved away from the Democratic Party and towards the Republican Party over racial and social issues, while racial and ethnic minorities have moved in the opposite direction.

On the other hand, Fiorina (2004) and others offer compelling data suggesting that voters themselves have not become more polarized on most political issues. On abortion, for instance, there is precious little evidence that the aggregate distribution of preferences has changed over time, nor is there evidence that Republicans have become more pro-life or that Democrats have become more pro-choice since the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade*. The distribution of preferences on other issues, both economic and social, show similar stability. Fiorina contends that office-holders and other political elites have become more polarized, and that voters have responded to the choice set offered in elections. But this does not mean that voters themselves have become more liberal or conservative.

Still, there is no escaping the feeling that elections are more polarized today. Furthermore, a careful examination of the data offers a way to reconcile the polarization debate. What appears to be occurring is that while partisans have not changed their issue positions much over time, they hold much more negative views about those on the other side of the debate these days. Table 1 compares the

thermometer ratings of the political parties from the 1980s and 1990s to those from the 2000s.⁴ From 1980 to 1996, both Democrats and Republicans rated the other party slightly above 50 on the 0-100 scale, and the mean difference between ratings of their own party versus those of the other side was a little over 20 points. From 2000-2008, partisans' average rating of the other party tumbled to about 39, while the mean difference between ratings of their own party versus the other side sky-rockets to about 35 points. Notice also that there has been little change among partisans with respect to feelings towards their own party. Antipathy is targeted rather than generalized.

Table 1. Evaluations of the Political Parties over Time

	<i>1980-1996</i>			<i>2000-2008</i>			Increase in Polarization
	Dem. Party	Rep. Party	Diff.	Dem. Party	Rep. Party	Diff.	
Democrats	73.9	50.5	23.4	73.2	38.9	34.3	10.9
Republicans	51.6	69.9	-18.3	38.5	73.1	-34.6	-16.3
Independents	53.3	53.2	0.1	54.9	53.4	1.5	1.4

Source: American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative file, 1952-2008.

The implication is clear. Voters may not hold more polarized opinions on political issues, but they are increasingly negative towards the other party and its candidates. Given data on the polarization of candidates and office holders (see, for example, Theriault 2008), it seems that electoral polarization is mostly driven by changes in the choice-set offered on Election Day. Voters on each side of the partisan aisle have been repelled by what they see as increasingly strident candidates *on the other side*. They seem much less bothered by changes in their own candidates, however, which have the effect of actually increasing the relationship between party identification and the vote.

What are the Prospects for Change?

In the party-systems literature, there is some consensus that change is more often driven by the mobilization of so-called “peripheral electorates” rather than by the persuasion of regular voters (see Andersen 1979). Put another way, the development of new parties or changes in the relative balance of votes are typically produced by the entrance of a new group into the electorate. In the U.S.,

⁴ Thermometer ratings ask respondents to use a 0-100 scale to rate how they feel about certain individuals or groups. 0 indicates extremely unfavorable feelings, 100 indicates extremely favorable feelings, and 50 indicates neutral feelings.

for example, the rise of Roosevelt's Democratic Party as the dominant force in politics was fueled by the mobilization of second-generation immigrants and newly enfranchised females. More distantly, the rise of Jackson's Democratic Party was fueled by the mobilization of rural westerners and immigrants in the large cities of the New England and Mid-Atlantic states.

To be sure, party-system changes in the U.S. and elsewhere involve some shifts in the allegiances of regular voters. Republican identification among regular voters dropped in the 1932 and 1936 elections. It recovered by 1940, however, and the Democrat's New Deal majority rested largely with the continued presence of the decidedly pro-Roosevelt cohort that emerged in 1932. In other words, persuasion matters but typically not as much as mobilization.

Looking at the current situation, the question thus becomes the size and character of the peripheral electorate in the U.S. How might the mobilization of these individuals change the nature of party-system competition? Judis and Teixeira (2002) tackled this question and argued that the mobilization of Latino and Asian-American voters would lead to a "new Democratic majority."⁵ The particulars of the argument are simple: 1) these groups constitute a growing proportion of the American population but have not been voting at rates comparable to those for other groups, and 2) to the extent that they do participate, they are strongly pro-Democratic. Therefore, to the extent demography is destiny, the Democrats are well-positioned.

On its face, the Judis/Teixeira thesis is plausible. According to estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Latino population will increase by 7.99 million (which translates to a growth rate of 14.7%) between 2010 and 2015. Similarly, the Asian-American population will increase by 2.11 million over this time frame (a 16.1% growth rate). Growth rates for whites and blacks, in comparison, are expected to be 3.9% and 5.6%, respectively.

The potential for Latinos and Asian-Americans to provide the impetus for party-system change is further enhanced by the fact that current turnout rates for Latinos and Asian-Americans lag behind those of whites and blacks. According to the 2008 National Election Study, self-reported turnout among Latinos in the presidential election was 66%, while for Asian-Americans it was 64%. But 82% of blacks and 78% of whites reported voting. Thus, Latinos and Asian-Americans are both growing and under-represented populations. These numbers, and a slew of others just like them, give rise to the popular (and somewhat tedious) "sleeping giant" metaphor.

⁵ Part of their argument is that college-educated white voters, who tend to cluster in the suburban environs of cities such as Boston, Seattle, Austin, and San Jose, are trending Democratic over life-style issues. While the bulk of their analysis focuses on mobilization, this part of their study certainly constitutes a "persuasion" argument.

Of course, if Latinos and Asian-Americans voted like the existing electorate, these numbers would be less intriguing. But both groups have had a decidedly pro-Democratic tilt in recent elections. In 2008, for instance, Latinos went for Obama over McCain by 65% to 31%, while Asian-Americans went for Obama over McCain by 62% to 35%. This aspect of the story is key to the Judis/Teixeira thesis, and has Democratic consultants salivating: *if* Latinos and Asian-Americans begin participating at levels comparable to whites and blacks *and* continue to prefer Democratic candidates, they could swing the electorate decisively to the left. More particularly, currently Republican states with sizable Latino and Asian-American populations, such as Texas, could come into play for the Democrats. On the flip-side, currently Democratic states with sizable Latino and Asian-American populations, such as California, could become permanently out of reach for the GOP.

The problem with this scenario is that it assumes that Latinos and Asian-Americans will either mobilize naturally (while retaining their current partisan predispositions) or will prefer the Democratic position on some new mobilizing issue. To take the initial scenario first, it seems highly unlikely that Latino and Asian-Americans will become mobilized around the issues that currently drive Democratic and Republican competition. The size-of-government issue has been around at least since the 1930s (and may even be plausibly dated back to the election of 1800!) and has yet to inspire Latinos and Asian-Americans to turn out to vote. It is possible that these groups may suddenly realize the power of these issues and this debate as they become more fully assimilated, but one may reasonably doubt it.

The second scenario—that Latinos and Asian-Americans mobilize around some new political issue—is consistent with both the party-systems literature (see, especially, Sundquist 1983) and also with precedent: the emergence of new issues has been a major force behind almost all party-system change in U.S. history. But the more specific assumption—that Latinos and Asian-Americans will continue to prefer the Democrats by a 2:1 ratio on some new issue—is contentious at best. Maybe they will, but maybe they will not. And if they do, who is to say that other groups will not prefer the Republican position in a way that further alters the competitive balance? Or more grandly, perhaps the new issue strains the existing parties in such a way that a new party (or parties) emerge.

In short, although it seems likely that currently under-mobilized groups will provide the raw material for transforming the party system, it is extremely difficult to predict the issue dynamic—and attendant coalitional reactions—that will accomplish this. In politics, demography is not' always destiny, and issues often matter.

Conclusion

This essay considers a simple question: why have recent elections in the U.S. produced such disparate results, given the power and stability of partisan attachments? The data confirm that people do vote their party attachments, and that while persuasion has occurred in recent elections, it can probably account for only 2-3 points of the swing. Mobilization, especially differential mobilization of Democrats and Republicans, seems to be at the heart of the explanation for volatility in the presidential vote. Furthermore, the existence of a large peripheral electorate in the U.S. suggests that mobilization is likely to drive future changes in the American party system.

The analysis offered here is far from comprehensive or definitive. For example, I consider only presidential elections, and one could easily argue that the more interesting volatility is in congressional election outcomes. The basic contours of the story there could of course be the same, but it is also possible that factors such as redistricting and campaign finance make these elections different. Moreover, the preeminence of mobilization as the explanation for electoral volatility at the presidential level (or any level) begs the question of why partisans of one side or the other were more likely to come out to vote in a given election. Democrats mobilized in 2006 and 2008, while Republicans mobilized in 2010, but is this simply because they were angry about what the president (Bush in 2006 and 2008, and Obama in 2010) was doing? Or did the parties engage in mobilization activities that took advantage of these latent sentiments? Such questions clearly require additional theorizing and data.

My sense is that both of the parties have been quite successful in mobilizing their partisans in recent presidential elections. Gone are the days when the parties and their candidates relied exclusively on broadcast television to convince voters to go to the polls. Today, a personal touch is applied and voters can count on being contacted early and often. In light of this, outcomes in these races have hinged on having an edge with respect to interest and engagement. To use a belabored metaphor, the parties gather the low-hanging fruit, and the events of the past four years determine which side's tree has the greater yield.

Yet neither party has figured out how to harvest the fruit at the top of the tree. These peripheral voters are there, just out of reach. The question is whether the parties can reach them through superior outreach or whether external forces (issues) are required to move them. I suspect it is the latter. But either way, these voters need to be brought into the system. The American party system does not face a crisis of legitimacy at present. But if minority groups become a larger and larger share of the population without being engaged by the political parties, the crisis will come.

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