Partisan Push and Pull

From Asymmetrical Elite Polarization to Public Opinion Polarization

American party politicians have become increasingly polarized over the past few decades (McCarty et al., 2008; Theriault, 2008). Such elite polarization has not only shaped citizens’ partisan identities and issue preferences (Abramowitz, 2010; Davis & Dunaway, 2016; Levendusky, 2010) but also fundamentally changed the way public opinions are formed (Druckman et al., 2013).

While the path from elite polarization to public polarization is usually explained as a partisan voting process, i.e., ordinary partisans follow their party elites’ issue preferences (Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Layman & Carsey, 2002), an alternative explanation, that people are repelled by their political rivals’ position, is less explored. The latter path resembles “negative voting”, whereby people vote against what they dislike instead of voting for their ideal vision of society (Maggiotto & Piereson, 1977; Medeiros & Noël, 2014; Weber, 2021). It also finds support in the prolific research on affective polarization where policy attitudes are found to be driven primarily by the affective rejection of the other side (Iyengar et al., 2012; Lelkes, 2021).

To examine the tension between partisan voting and negative voting in voters’ issue preferences, we ask the following research question: how do the “pulling” effect of one’s own party and the “pushing” effect of the rival party impact people’s issue preferences?

Based on Levendusky’s (2010) classical experiment on elite cues and public polarization, we propose a novel survey experiment to explore the research question. We will provide participants with cues of *asymmetrical elite polarization* on trade policies and examine changes in their issue positions and behavioral intentions. We also consider the effect of elite outliers – politicians who endorse the opposite party’s position – in moderating the effect of general elite polarization on public opinion. Our design incorporates three two-level factors, namely (1) polarized/moderate ingroup elites, (2) polarized/moderate outgroup elites, and (3) the presence/absence of elite outliers.

In addition to theoretically explaining the mechanism through which elite polarization is trickled down to the public, our study also has important practical implications. As polarization in the U.S. is hardly symmetrical (Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Mann & Ornstein, 2016; Theriault, 2013), an investigation into the differentiated effects of partisan “push” and “pull” can potentially reveal the two parties’ distinct sources of political motivation. Furthermore, since
perceived elite polarization is influenced by not only real-existing elite polarization but also the way polarization is communicated (Robison & Mullinix, 2016), an understanding of how perceived elite polarization influences the public can also help develop communication strategies for political mobilization or consensus formation.

References


