Economic Divisions and Political Polarization in Red and Blue America

BY ANDREW GELMAN

Americans are worried about polarization, but we can't always agree on what exactly we're polarized about. You might say that we're polarized about polarization.

On the left are concerns about economic polarization, the widening divide between the haves and the have-nots and the increasingly unequal distribution at the high end, with the richest *one-tenth of 1 percent* of Americans taking 7 percent of the income, which is associated with the declining influence of labor unions and a political tilt toward the rich. From the right come concerns about social polarization, Red America versus Blue America, a clash of values so strong that liberals can no longer talk to conservatives, a country in which ordinary people struggle with a liberal media and a decadent cultural elite ("Hollywood versus America," in the words of movie critic Michael Medved).

How can we make sense of these different claims? The rich and poor have always been with us, and political and cultural issues have always been fiercely disputed (otherwise they wouldn't be "issues" in the first place). And geographic divides in American politics are hardly new; the South is different and always has been, and urban and rural areas have always represented different interests.

But there have been some big changes in recent decades. As noted above, economic inequality has reached levels not seen for over a hundred years, and, based on their votes in Congress, the two major political parties are as far apart as they have ever been. These changes have been the background to major political changes—a general move to the right on economic issues (with an increasing skepticism about government intervention in the economy and sharp declines in top tax rates) and a leftward shift on most social issues (to the frustration of social conservatives who have no easy response to public opinion that has shifted so much that half of Americans support gay rights). This article describes some recent research connecting these different forms of polarization.

Rich and Poor Voters

Our study began in the wake of the 2000 election, in reaction to articles by political journalists, such as David Brooks, who noted the irony that in recent elections, the Democrats, the traditional party of the common man, had performed best in the richer, more cosmopolitan states in the Northeast and West Coast (and in fact, in the richer and more cosmopolitan places within these regions, cities such as Manhattan and San Francisco), while the Republicans, who traditionally represented America's elites, had dominated in lower-income areas in the South and Midwest and in unassuming suburbs, rather than in America's glittering centers of power.

What could explain this turnaround? The most direct story—hinted at by Brooks in his articles and books on America's new, cosmopolitan, liberal upper class—is that the parties simply switched, with the new-look Democrats representing hedge-fund billionaires, college professors, and other urban liberals, and Republicans getting the votes of middle-class middle Americans. This story of partisan reversal has received some attention from pundits. For example, TV talk show host Tucker Carlson said, "Okay, but here's the fact that nobody ever, ever mentions — Democrats win rich people. Over $100,000 in income, you are likely more than not to vote for Democrats. People never point that out. Rich people vote liberal." And Michael Barone, the editor of the *Almanac of American Politics,* wrote that the Democratic Party "does not run very well among the common people."

But Tucker Carlson and Michael Barone were both wrong,

FIGURE 1   Difference in Republican share of the two-party vote, comparing voters in the upper and lower third of income, for presidential elections since 1940. Since the 1970s the parties have returned to the moderate level of economic polarization that obtained in the 1940s.
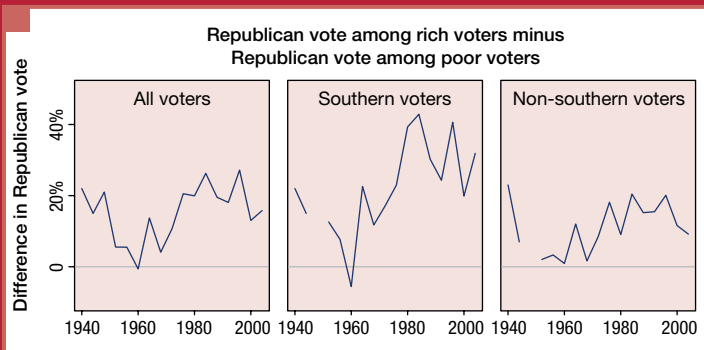
wrong, wrong. Not just wrong but obviously wrong, from the standpoint of any political scientist who knows opinion polls. Republican candidates consistently do best among upper-income voters and worst at the low end. In the country as a whole and separately among Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and others, richer Americans are more likely to vote Republican.

But the difference in voting patterns between rich and poor is not large, especially within ethnic groups; rich Whites are only about 10 percent more likely than poor Whites to choose Republican candidates for president. In that sense, the journalists are onto something: Income is only weakly related to political preferences, and there are a fair number of rich Democrats and poor Republicans.

After reading such books as *What's the Matter with Kansas* by Thomas Frank and *The Conscience of a Liberal* by Paul Krugman, you might get the idea that American politics has moved to this point from a golden age of class-based voting with full-throated partisans like Harry Truman rallying the traditional Democratic constituencies. The story is that sometime between the late 1960s and early 1980s, a breakdown of the social fabric led to working-class voters abandoning the Democratic Party, and that Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and other recent party leaders have been in the unenviable position of trying to woo ordinary Americans away from the Republicans' populist appeal. Neither Frank nor Krugman quite make this argument, but their books have been misread to this effect.

The story of declining class-based voting does not fit the data. Figure 1 shows the difference in voting between rich and poor in presidential elections since 1940, the year of Franklin Roosevelt's election to a third term and the first year for which we have individual-level survey data.

Republican candidates consistently do about 15 to 20 percentage points better among upper-income than lower-income voters, with the only sustained exceptions being in the 1950s to early 1960s, a time during which Republican president Dwight Eisenhower was a moderate whose most notable economic act was to *not* try to dismantle Social Security, and during which John Kennedy was a moderate Democrat who was famous for a

tax cut. Since 1972, income-based voting cleavages have been as large as they have ever been, at least since the dawn of polling. To look at the time series from the other direction, the political differences between upper and lower incomes during the campaigns of legendary partisans FDR and Truman were no greater than they are today.

Most low- and moderate-income voters choose Democrats, but the sizable minority who vote Republican tend to have conservative economic views. Democrats retain the image of the party of the people—in a 2006 CNN poll, 66 percent of respondents agreed that the Democratic Party "looks out for the interest of the average American," while only 37 percent said this about the Republicans, and these percentages have been fairly stable over the years. Republican candidates are not too proud to make a populist pitch (they are, after all, trying to get a majority of the vote), but on economic policy, their strongest card is voters' distrust of big government. And although the aggregate pattern of income and voting is about the same today as it was 70 years ago, the social and occupational profiles of these groups have changed. Business owners have moved from the center and have become strongly Republican, whereas professionals have shifted in the other direction and are now a reliable Democratic constituency. As *Washington Post* journalist E. J. Dionne has noted, the Democrats' current appeal among well-educated voters is strongest among those with household incomes under $75,000—"the incomes of teachers, social workers, nurses, and skilled technicians, not of Hollywood stars, bestselling authors, or television producers, let alone corporate executives."

Misconceptions about income and voting are all over the place in the serious popular press. For example, James Ledbetter in *Slate* claimed that "America's rich now tilt politically left in their opinions." In the *London Review of Books*, political theorist David Runciman wrote, "It is striking that the people who most dislike the whole idea of healthcare reform—the ones who think it is socialist, godless, a step on the road to a police state—are often the ones it seems designed to help..... Right-wing politics has become a vehicle for channeling this popular anger against intellectual snobs. The result is that many of America's poorest citizens have a deep emotional attachment to a party that serves the interests of its richest." No, no, and no. An analysis of opinion polls finds, unsurprisingly, but in contradiction to the above claims, that older and high-income voters are the groups that most strongly oppose health care reform.

The Red State–Blue State Project

How can thoughtful journalists on both sides of the Atlantic make such a basic error that is so directly contradicted by publicly available survey data? The starting point is the electoral map, showing Democratic blue in rich states and Republican red in poor states. And this map is no illusion: In 2004, George W. Bush won the 15 poorest states, starting with nearly 60 percent of the vote in Mississippi, the poorest state. At the other end, John Kerry (and Al Gore before him) won in Connecticut and eight of the ten next richest states.

Before the 1980s, rich states did not consistently lean toward either party. The red state–blue state, rich state–poor state pat-

tern is relatively new, and it seems to have led many political observers to take this state-level pattern of income and voting and mistakenly attribute it to individual voters and to smaller localities. For example, David Brooks wrote that "upscale areas everywhere" supported the Democratic ticket in 2000, and he illustrated his point by driving from liberal Montgomery County, Maryland, one of the richest counties in the nation and strongly Democratic, to a lower-income, rural, Republican-voting county in Pennsylvania. Figure 2 shows George W. Bush's vote share in the counties of Maryland, plotted versus the average income in each county. Brooks's claim about upscale areas does not completely fit the Maryland counties, but it is perhaps a reasonable summary.

But now consider Texas. Figure 3 plots Bush's vote share in 2000 against average income, by county. In Texas, the richest counties are solid Republican territory, while voters in the poorest counties strongly vote for Democrats.

Our first goal with this research project was simply to point out the confusion and let people know what is going on with income and voting. But in exploring these misconceptions, we notice that geography keeps sneaking in; there's the difference between income and voting at the state versus the individual level, and then there are the patterns of voting and county income, which look so much different in Maryland than in Texas. Our key step was to put geography and demography together to study how income and voting relate in different parts of the country.

Richer Americans tend to vote Republican, and poorer Americans tend to vote Democratic, but the relation between income and vote choice varies by state and region of the country, as we illustrate in Figure 4 with the poorest state (Mississippi), a middle-income swing state (Ohio), and the richest state (Connecticut). To keep the graph clean, we show only three states here, but the pattern holds for the country at large: Income predicts Republican voting strongly in most of the poorest states and weakly in most of the richest states.

These systematic geographic differences provide some clue as to the media's confusion on income and voting. If you live in Texas, say, you might directly observe conservative Republicans from wealthy suburbs. But the states in which national media figures live—New York, California, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, and Connecticut—are states where high- and low-income people vote similarly. A journalist who lives in Manhattan is likely to mingle with upper middle class liberals and not realize that, at the national level, richer Americans are more likely to be conservative Republicans.

Compounding the confusion is the political makeup of journalists themselves. In a national survey of journalists conducted by Indiana University researchers in 2003, half the respondents declined to state a political affiliation, but of those who did, Democrats outnumbered Republicans 2 to 1. And among journalists (but not among the population as a whole), there was a positive correlation between income and *Democratic* voting. This pattern could well make this Democratic-leaning group less likely to perceive the larger patterns of income and voting in the population.

FIGURE **2** Income and voting in the counties of Maryland and the city of Baltimore in the 2000 election.
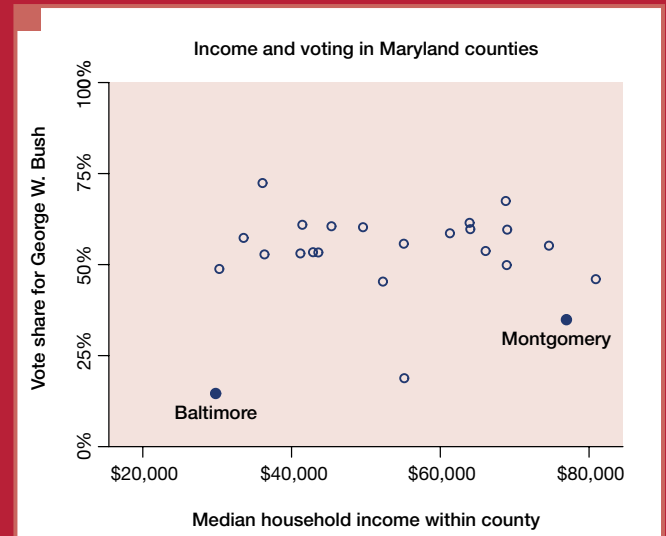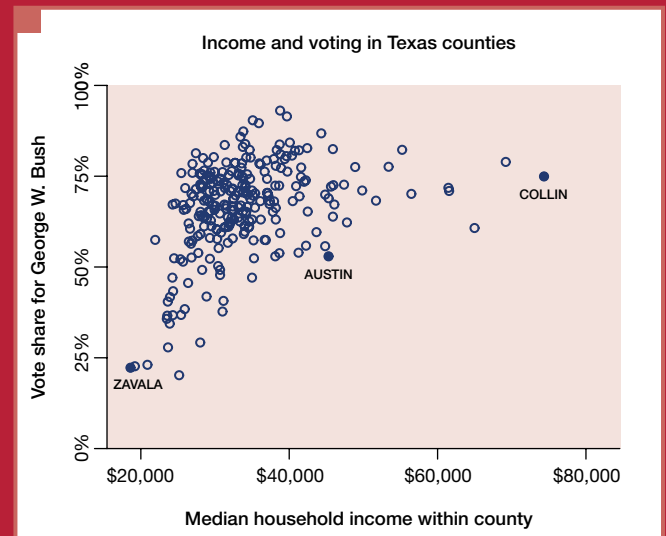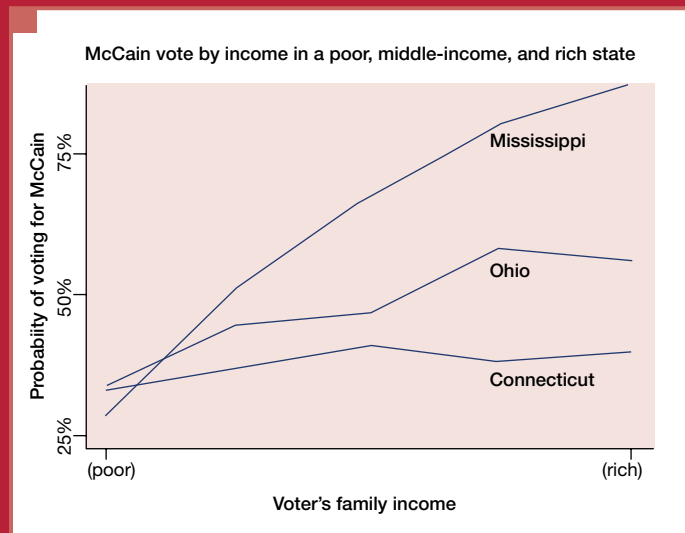

FIGURE **3** Income and voting in the counties of Texas in 2000. Collin, the richest county, is a white suburb of Dallas, and Zavala is a rural Latino county in the southwest of the state. The capital city of Austin fell in between.

A well-off liberal journalist in the Northeast, when trying to understand how the other half lives, could easily be drawn to the false conclusion that low-income people in other parts of the country are conservative Republicans. But, as our analysis of survey data show, this is not the case. There are definitely conservative groups and places—for example, 90 percent of whites in Mississippi voted for John McCain in 2008—but in general, in the poorer states, it is the richer voters who are most likely to vote Republican.

FIGURE 4 **Income and voting in a poor (Mississippi), middle-income (Ohio), and rich (Connecticut) state as estimated from pre-election polls adjusted to match the 2008 election outcome.**

McCain vote by income in a poor, middle-income, and rich state

Probability of voting for McCain

Mississippi

Ohio

Connecticut

(poor)   (rich)

Voter's family income

The Culture War Is Happening among the Upper Middle Class

Return to Figure 4, which shows income and voting in Mississippi, Ohio, and Connecticut. This time, instead of looking at the states one at a time, compare the three lines at the low and high end of income. You'll see that the big voting differences among these three states arise at the high end of income but not at the low end.

To put it another way, suppose you are told whether someone lives in a rich or a poor state. This information is a strong predictor of how this person votes if he or she is upper middle class to rich. Among voters on the lower part of the income distribution, the political complexion of rich and poor states looks basically the same.

It's not possible to infer all this from Figure 4 alone, which shows only three states. A graph with all 50 states would be a mess; rather than looking like a fan with a vertex at the lower-left corner, the graph would appear more like a pile of pick-up sticks. We are *not* claiming that poor people vote the same in all states. What we have found is that *state income* does not predict voting among the poor. To put it another way, the red state–blue state divide is concentrated in the upper half of the income distribution. As we like to say, it's not the Prius versus the pick-up truck; it's the Prius versus the Hummer.

We have also studied the interaction of income and political culture in another way, through religious attendance. At all income levels, church attenders are more Republican than non-

attenders. But the differences are larger among the upper middle class and rich, which is consistent with our general theme that the political culture war is concentrated among upper-income Americans.

Putting It All Together

Now let us return to the debates over polarization.

Economic divisions in America are real, and they correlate most strongly to political divisions in the Republican areas in the south and center of the country, not so much in the northeast and far west and so are less noticeable by the national media.

Americans are also divided over social issues, but these disagreements translate into political divisions most strongly among upper-income White voters. For example, among Whites, John McCain did 24 percentage points better among abortion opponents than among supporters of abortion rights. Among Hispanic voters, the difference was only 2 percentage points.

Political scientist Morris Fiorina has argued that polarization is strongest among political activists, and that much of the observed partisan disagreement reflects a deep divide not so much among *voters* as between Democratic and Republican *politicians*. Our research supports Fiorina. On individual issues or clusters of issues, Americans are not much more polarized now than 30 years ago. But issue attitudes are much more closely tied to party identification and self-declared liberal–conservative ideology. As a nation, we have become much more polarized in our views of the major political parties, without there being much of a move to the extremes on the issues themselves. Voters—especially those with higher levels of education and political involvement—have sorted themselves into parties based on political ideology.

In his final speech before leaving Congress, former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay said, "The common lament over the recent rise in political partisanship is often nothing more than a veiled complaint about the recent rise of political conservatism." He had a point, or at least part of a point. Liberals and conservatives in turn have invoked polarization to explain frustrating trends in economic and social policies that have been enacted seemingly in the face of public opposition.

But much of today's partisan polarization arises not from voters but from their responses to polarized parties. Meanwhile, higher income continues to be associated with voting Republican, just as it has long been. It turns out that this association is stronger in more conservative parts of the country. In the liberal Northeast and West Coast, however, the income-voting association is weaker; journalists who have noticed the latter have mistakenly applied this pattern to the country as a whole.

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