

Media, Polarization, and the 2016 Election

Matthew Gentzkow

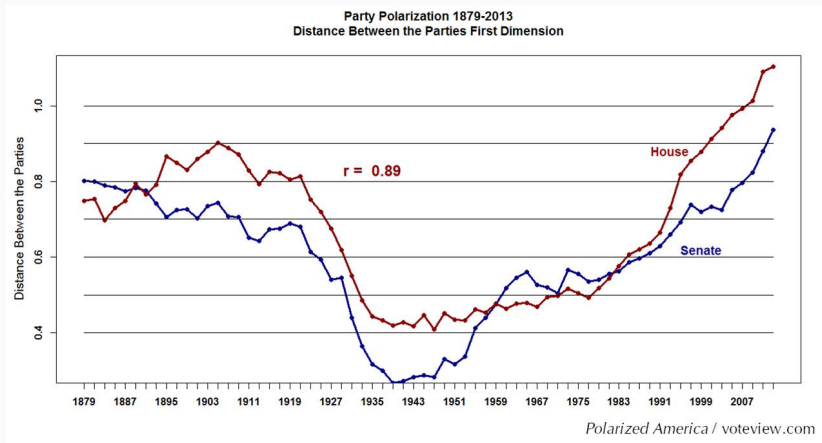


Questions

1. Are Americans more polarized than ever before?
2. Is it the Internet's fault?
3. Did fake news change the 2016 election outcome?

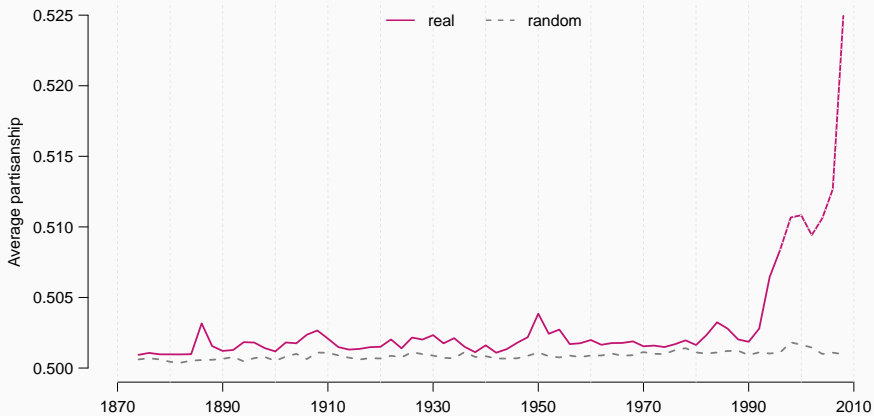
Trends in Polarization

Congress: Roll Call Votes



Source: Poole & Rosenthal

Congress: Partisan Language



Source: Gentzkow et al. 2016

Voters: Prior literature

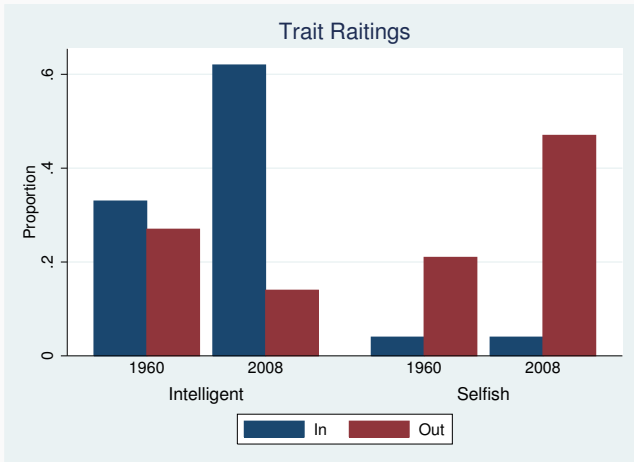
- Fiorina and Abrams (2008)
 - “The most direct evidence... shows **little or no evidence of increased polarization.**”
- Ansolabehere et al. (2006)
 - “The great divide across the American states is **not really much of a divide at all.**”
- Glaeser & Ward (2006)
 - The proposition that “America’s political divisions are increasing” is one of the “**myths of American political geography.**”

Where *don't* we see evidence of increasing divisions?

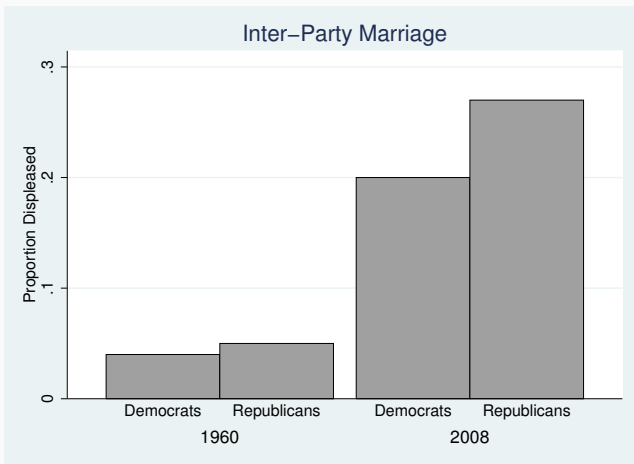
- **Views on individual issues**
- Self-described ideology
- Party identification
- Residential segregation

Where *do* we see evidence of increasing divisions?

- Correlation between issue views and party
- Correlation of views across issues
- Straight ticket voting
- **Hostility / negative feeling toward those on the other side**

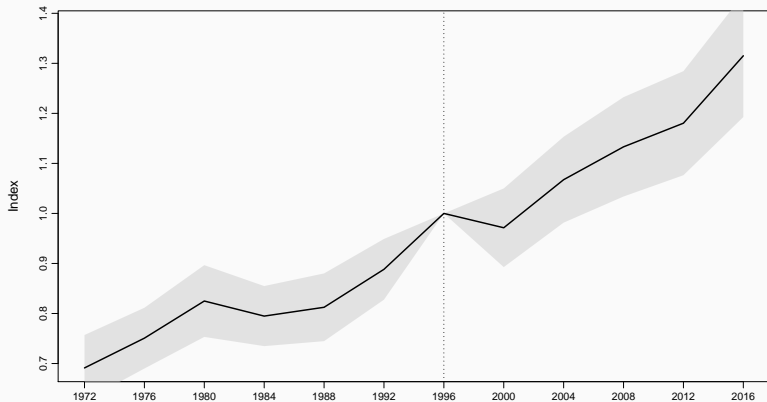


Source: Five-Nation Civic Culture Study (Almond and Verba 1960);
YouGov/Polimetrix poll (2008)



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Index of 9 Polarization Measures



Bottom Line

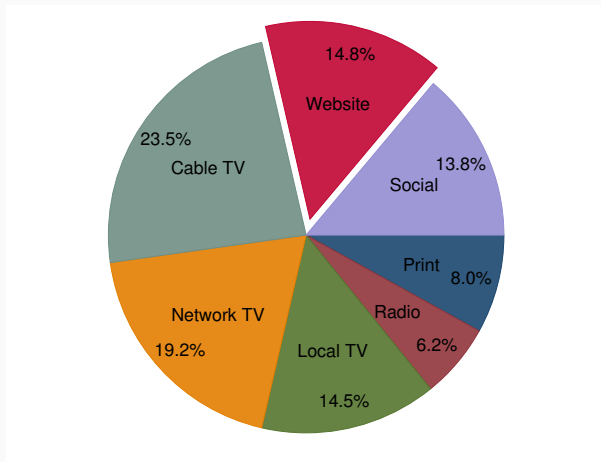
- Polarization of politicians clearly increasing
- Over the last decade, increasing evidence that this is true for voters as well
- Shows up most clearly in *feelings* about the other side

Digital Media and Polarization

Birds-Eye View

- As of 2013, all digital media platforms accounted for **8%** of total news consumption time (McKinsey)
- In 2016, **18%** of Americans said they got news and information from social media “often” (Pew)
- In 2016, **14%** of Americans said social media was their “most important” source of election news (Gentzkow & Allcott 2017)
- In 2016, **4%** of Americans said they trust information on social media “a lot” (Pew)

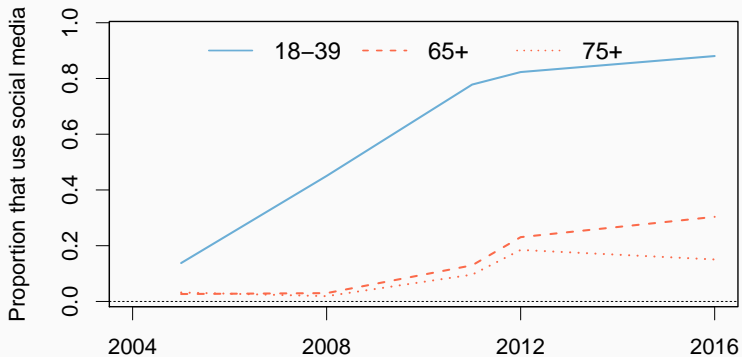
“Most important” source of 2016 election news:



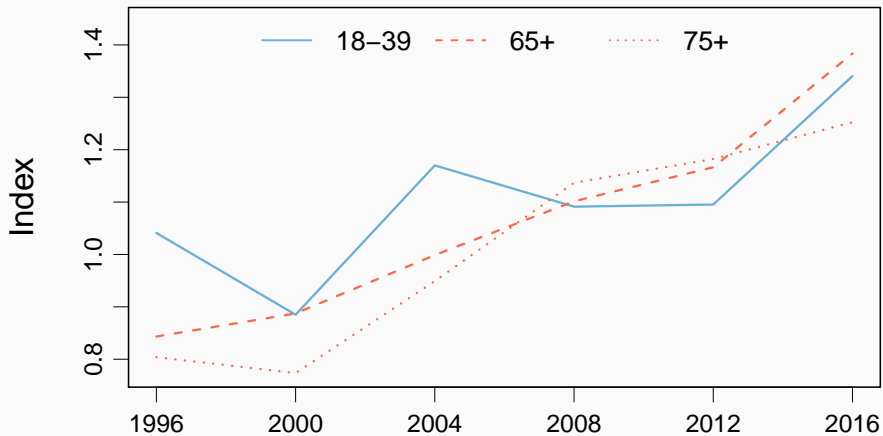
Source: Gentzkow & Allcott 2017

Are the groups getting more polarized those that use social media the most?

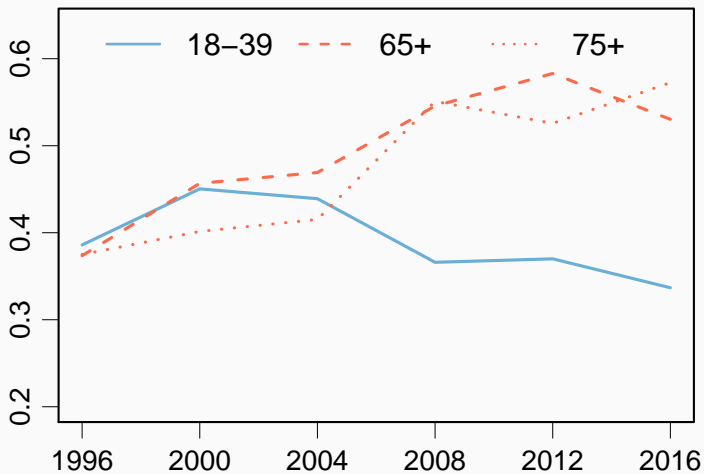
Social media use by age



Polarization by age



Republican voting by age



Are people in online echo chambers?

Gentzkow & Shapiro (2011)

- Ideological segregation of online news consumption low, similar to offline media
 - Most consumption concentrated in large sites
 - Those who visit extreme sites are also heavy users who sample across the spectrum
- Segregation of face-to-face interactions much higher

Echo chambers in 2016

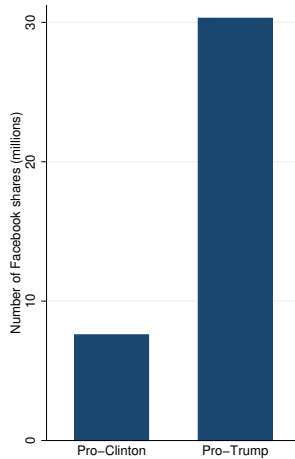
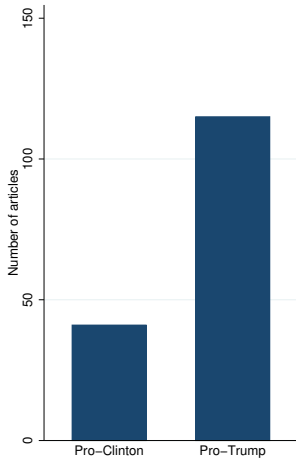
- Substantial segregation on Facebook, similar to face-to-face networks (Adamic et al. 2015)
- Still a small enough part of the news diet that overall picture has not changed dramatically (Flaxman et al. 2015)
- Some recent evidence that online segregation may have been higher in run-up to 2016 election (Peterson et al. 2017)

Fake News

Sources

- Online audience data
- Fact checking websites
- New online Survey (late Nov, 2016)

Quantity of Fake News



Exposure to Fake News

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- Method 3
 - Survey: Test recall of fake and placebo stories
 - Implies \approx 1.1 fake news story per voter

Summary

- Best guess: Average voter read and remembered on the order of **1-5 fake news stories**
- Could this have changed the election outcome?

Conclusion

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- Polarization is real
- Digital media are increasingly important, but probably not the driving force
- Other explanations?
 - Cable TV
 - Politicians → voters
 - Structural factors