

Bringing Culture Back In: Social Group Polarization and the “Culture Wars” in the U.S.

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Abstract

Ongoing debates about political polarization in the United States have focused on analyzing putative “culture wars” at the elite and mass levels. Despite the terminology, the debate has not addressed cultural groups’ attitudes toward each other, and instead defines polarization in terms of either values and worldviews or parties and voting. These foci have diverted attention from assessing group divisiveness in the U.S. based on social group attachments and evaluations. This paper addresses the question of whether there has been an increase in divisions among social groups over time in the U.S. by analyzing trends in a fundamental psychological affiliation toward groups, people’s sense of favorability toward their in-groups and animosity toward out-groups. Using trend data from 1964-2008, I find little evidence of high or widening polarization on the cleavages of race, class, age, gender, or religion, and generally favorable attitudes toward both in-groups and out-groups.

Key words: political polarization, social groups, group cleavages, in-group favorability, culture wars

1. Introduction

Political conflict is a continuing preoccupation of social scientists, and political analysis in the U.S. has been particularly attentive to issues of intolerance and discrimination toward minorities, antagonisms among social groups, and the potential for disunity. The specific concerns have shifted from the repression of unpopular political viewpoints in the 1950s, to political activism by minority groups, women, and young people in the 1960s and 1970s, and to responses by social conservatives and the rise of multiculturalism in the following decades. Beginning in the 1990s, these concerns gradually gelled around the idea that the core dividing lines in the U.S. are hardening and widening, and consist of cultural conflicts or “culture wars,” based on disagreements over fundamental beliefs regarding worldviews, morality, and ideas about the good society (e.g., Schlesinger 1998, Baker 2005, Huntington 2005, Fiorina et al. 2005).

The application of the idea of cultural conflict to political phenomena has been framed predominantly in terms of a growing political polarization that saps the political system of moderation and compromise, corroding political discourse and rendering policymaking all but impossible. Research in this vein has traversed two largely separate tracks: one focused on social groups and values, the other on political parties and elections. The first (social groups and values) track was exemplified by the concept of “culture wars” increasingly dividing Americans into camps defined by opposing traditionalist and progressive worldviews (Hunter 1991).

The second (parties and polarization) track initially focused on party polarization among political elites, primarily Congress and party activists. More recent work has investigated mass attitudes and political behavior among the public (e.g., DiMaggio et al. 1996, Green et al. 2004, McCarty et al. 2006). Research in this vein was galvanized by the 2005 publication of the book *Culture Wars* (Fiorina et al.) which sought to debunk the idea of sharp and widening divisions among the public. The book has structured much of the extensive debate about mass polarization around the specific issue of polarization on the basis of party, whether defined as partisan identification, voting behavior, or divisions on issues and attitudes that contribute to partisan antagonisms (e.g. Layman et al. 2006, McCarty et al. 2006, Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, Hetherington and Weiler 2009, Kinder and Kam 2009).

In spite of the use of “culture wars” in the titles of the leading books in each track, the groups and values track and parties and elections track have seldom been well integrated. There is little research linking the concept of culture defined in terms of norms, beliefs, and values with the complementary concept of social groups that share certain beliefs. Instead, much of the research on social groups and values emphasizes mass differences in fundamental worldviews (e.g., Baker 2005) or personality psychology (e.g. Hetherington and Weiler 2009) and only partially integrates those concepts with longstanding social group cleavages. Few studies have examined antagonism between social groups more directly by using fundamental measures of inter-group identity and antipathy; those that do so often focus on one group cleavage such as ethnocentrism (Kinder and Kam 2009).

This article extends the previous analyses of polarization and cultural conflict in the U.S. by analyzing the positive and negative feelings people have toward social groups. Specifically, I evaluate both the extent of polarization between social groups and trends in polarization over time on five important social group cleavages: race, class, age, gender, and religion. My approach is to use public opinion survey data that measure people’s feelings of favorability and warmth toward groups defined by those five cleavages, and to compare the feelings of the people in each group on a cleavage to measure polarization. For example, I compare blacks’ feelings of favorability toward blacks and blacks’ favorability toward whites to see whether blacks view one group more positively than the other and to what extent there is a gap between the two. I then do the same analysis for whites’ feelings about both groups. This analytic strategy enables me to compare groups on both sides of a social group cleavage on one of the most fundamental psychological orientations people can have toward social groups: the degree of direct inter-group affect (emotion). To the extent that individuals’ identifications with and psychological orientations of favorability or antipathy toward social groups have been absent from polarization debates, this brings both the ideational and group aspects of culture back into the “culture war” debates.

2. Research on Polarization, Political Culture and Social Groups

Historically, the mainstream study of voter behavior in the U.S. has emphasized the role of social groups in both fostering participation and guiding partisan loyalties (Campbell et al., 1960, Shingles 1981, Green et al. 2002), as has been the case in most western democratic systems (e.g., Dalton 2008).

Similarly, research into political attitudes and their psychological foundations (as distinct from electoral behavior) has emphasized the role of social groups in fostering fundamental social and political identities with ramifications for a range of attitudes about other groups, issues and policy positions (Tajfel and Turner 1986, Conover 1984, Wong 2010).

These two streams of research seldom meet. Some research on party identification and party polarization assessed the contributions of social groups and group attitudes to partisanship (e.g., Green et al. 2002), and some research on group identification and emotion explored its electoral implications (Kinder and Kam 2009). However, the most fundamental concept of the group in political psychology and culture, individuals’ identification with groups and their emotional affinity to their in-groups and antipathy toward out-groups, has not been used to assess the degree of or trends in societal polarization. This article addresses this gap by analyzing U.S. public opinion data from 1964 to 2008 on in-group favorability and out-group hostility.

2.1 Social Group Polarization

Social group polarization is important in its own right, as it indexes the degree of social conflict in a society that political and other institutions must resolve or manage. Parties channel group demands and activism, but they must do so in ways that comport with the “rules of the game” in a political system and preserve its basic structure. If social group divisions become too extreme, not only will party systems have to manage more conflicting group claims for resources, but intergroup competition is more likely to extend beyond party systems and conventional politics into direct group conflict (Schlesinger 1998, Dalton 2008,). If polarization between social groups is intensifying, it portends future polarization between the parties that analyses such as Fiorina’s have thus far not found, and would support the conclusions of advocates of the polarization hypothesis such as Abramowitz and Saunders 2008).

Social group divisions form the main divisions and organizing principles of many party systems. Even in “mature” party systems, the initial social group bases of political parties linger.

Groups continue to be the source of many partisan differences, and group conflict can both be clarify the lines of difference between parties and transform party systems, as in the evolution of party dominance in the southern U.S. over the last half-century (Sundquist 1983, Carmines and Stimson 1989). Thus we should expect social group identifications and affiliations to be implicated in any broader societal or political polarization, and trends in these psychological orientations toward groups to index deepening conflict at the roots of society.

The plan of the paper is as follows. First, I discuss the multiple streams of the recent polarization literature, its focus on partisanship and policy, and its long-lost twin of research on social group identifications and in-group versus out-group attitudes. Then I analyze and discuss U.S. public opinion data from 1964-2008 to analyze trends in identification and group favoritism on the major social cleavages of race, sex, class, age, and religion. I conclude by integrating the findings of the trends analysis with current debates about the conceptualization and diagnosis of political polarization in the U.S. recommend ways to incorporate these strands of research into a more holistic understanding of social and political change.

3. Public Opinion Survey Data and Overview of the Data Analysis

The public opinion data used in this paper are from the American National Election Studies (ANES), surveys which are conducted every four years with the presidential election cycle. The ANES data provide the highest-quality trend data used by political and many other social scientists. The ANES surveys have three qualities that make them ideal for this analysis. First, the ANES samples and interviews are carefully constructed to maximize the representativeness of the samples, ensuring high quality data. Second, the number of interviews completed in each survey ranges from 1,000 - 2,400, enough to accurately assess the opinions of most of the social groups in this analysis. Third, the surveys have been conducted from 1964 to 2008 every presidential election year, and many of the feeling thermometer questions in this analysis have been asked in most of those years since 1972, enabling us to trace changes in opinion over time. To maximize comparability across years, all of the data in this analysis are from in-person surveys.

The analysis uses the ANES “feeling thermometers,” in which survey respondents are asked to rate a wide range of political figures and groups on a “thermometer” ranging from 0 to 100 degrees, designating cool and warm feelings, respectively. These measures have been used to measure inter-group evaluations such as ethnocentrism, group affect, party and ideological polarization, as well as in-group attachment and out-group hostility (e.g., Weisberg et al. 1995, Kinder and Kam 2009, Weisberg and Devine 2010).

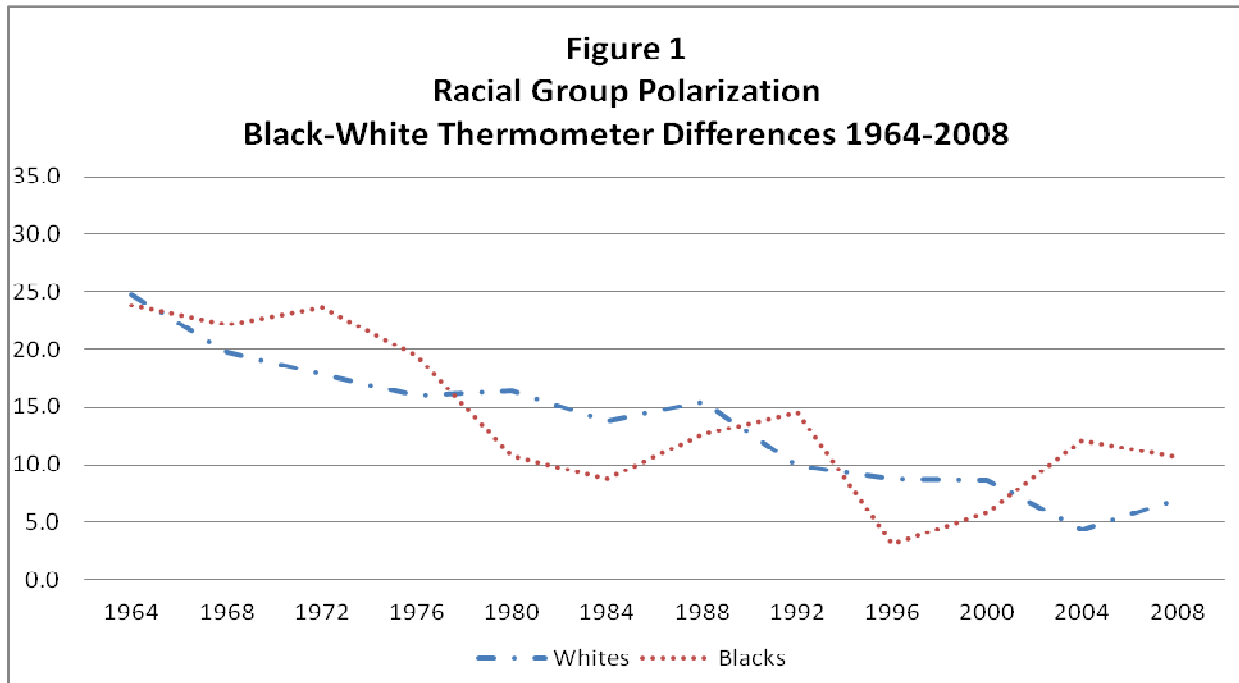
For each of the five social cleavages (race, class, age, gender, religion), I first average the available feeling thermometer scores about the social groups on a given cleavage for each group on the cleavage. For example, for each year in which the feeling thermometer about blacks is included in the survey, I calculate average scores on this black thermometer separately for black and white survey respondents. On the cleavage of race, both the black thermometer and white thermometer questions have been asked in every year since 1964. This enables me to calculate a difference score by subtracting one thermometer from the other. This is an ideal measure of polarization, as it compensates for the tendency of some people to give generally positive scores and others to give generally negative scores.

On the other four group cleavages, thermometers for more than one group are not included in the ANES surveys or are included only occasionally. For those cleavages, I assess polarization by comparing the differences between the groups on that cleavage (for example women and men) on the one available thermometer about that cleavage (toward women). In years when thermometers for both groups are available I compare the groups’ responses on both thermometers. Once the polarization measure is constructed, I use the averages to form a trendline for each group and plot the trends on a graph depicting each group’s opinion. Finally, I discuss how polarized the groups currently are in their views of each other and what the over-time trends have been in the extent of polarization between groups.

3.1 Data Analysis and Discussion

Figure 1 presents the trend in racial group polarization on the thermometers about blacks and whites. Since thermometer questions were asked about both groups in every survey since 1964, I was able to calculate a polarization measure by subtracting the thermometer score of each respondent’s in-group from the score for their out-group. The resulting scores range from -100 to 100.

A score of 100 would indicate high polarization, rating one’s own group positively at 100 and one’s out-group negatively at 0, while a score of 0 would indicate no polarization, with the respondent rating both their in-group and out-group equally. Negative scores are possible and would indicate the unusual situation of a person rating their out-group more favorably than their in-group.

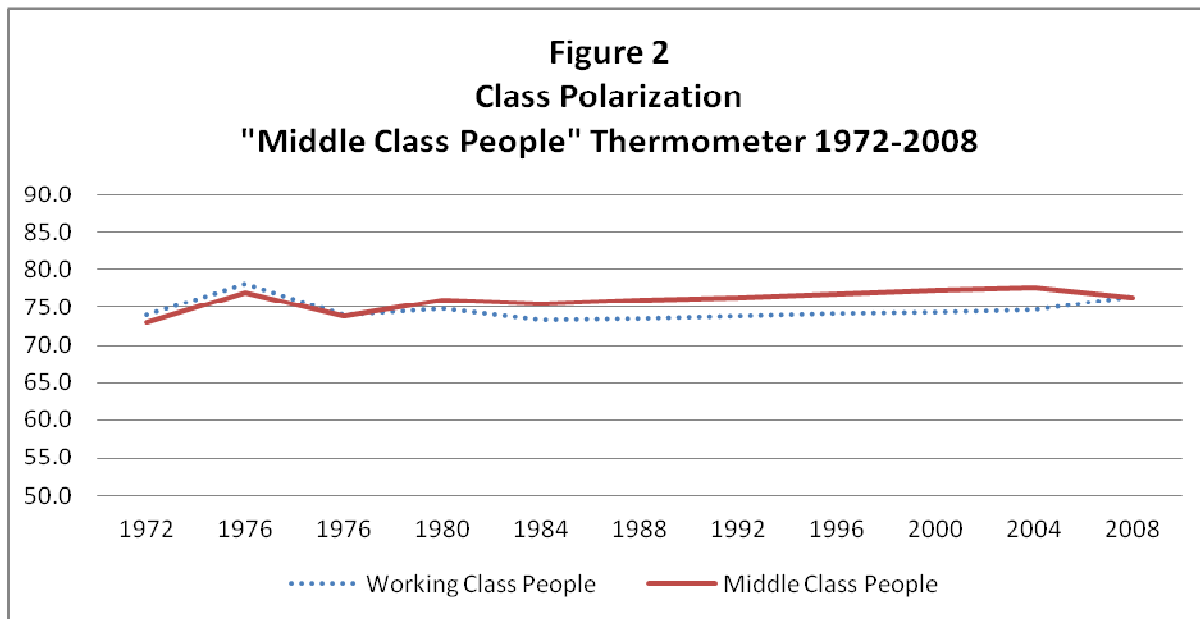


Note: Lines represent respondents’ in-group thermometer score minus their out-group score; positive values (1 to 100) indicate a respondent rates his or her own group more positively than the out-group. For example, in 2008 blacks’ scores were higher on the black thermometer than the white thermometer by 10 points; whites’ scores were higher on the white than black thermometer by 7 points.

Three important findings emerge from Figure 1. First, the degree of polarized opinion expressed by both blacks and whites has declined substantially since 1964, when both blacks and whites rated their in-group an average of 25 points higher than they rated their out-group. Since 1992, polarization has ranged from 3 to 12 points, indicating that inter-group antipathy has declined over the period, not increased as in other research measuring different attitudes. Second, while there is still some degree of polarization, it is relatively low; since 1992 the average polarization score has been about eight points for both blacks and whites, which is a minimal level on a 200-point scale. The third important finding emerges in the raw data for each thermometer, not shown in Figure 1. On average, both groups express positive feelings toward each other. Blacks’ average thermometer score toward whites is 70.5, while whites’ average score toward blacks is 61.8.

Together these findings indicate that black-white polarization has decreased since 1964 to low current levels with little out-group antipathy. Although other research has shown there are important group differences in blacks’ and whites’ voting behavior, partisanship, and issue positions (e.g., Green et al. 2002, Fiorina et al. 2005, 2008), these differences have not engendered overt hostility between these groups.

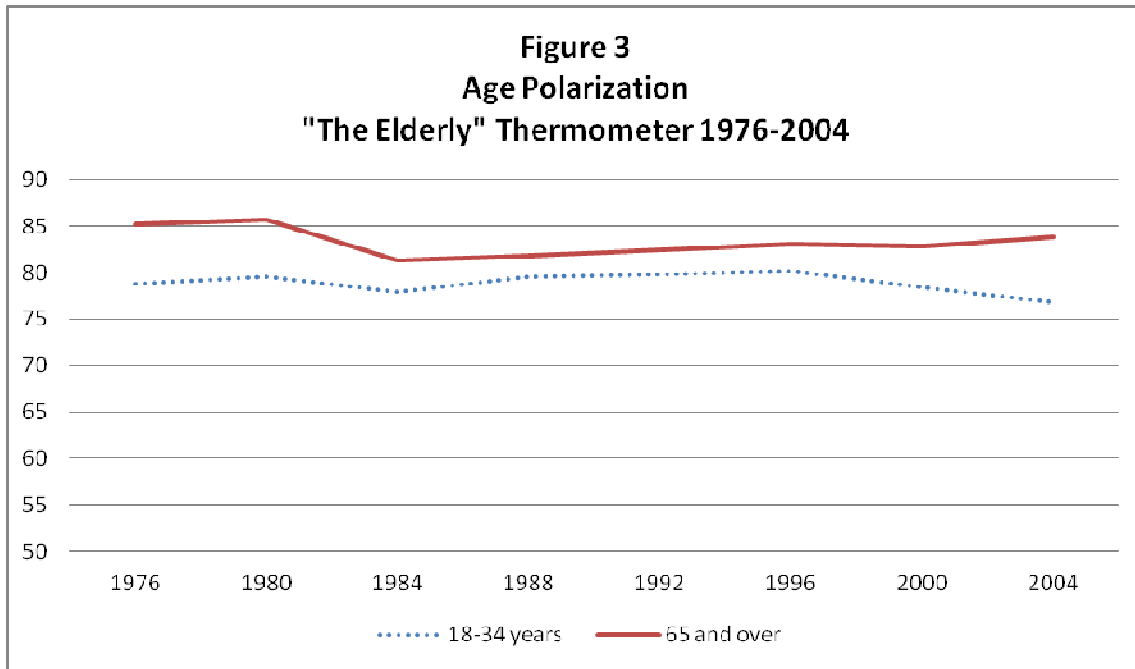
Class polarization has been less well measured by the ANES, with no data from before 1972 or between 1988-2000. In addition, the thermometer for the working class has been asked only twice, in 2004 and 2008. Nonetheless, the survey data we do have is clear. Figure 2 shows the trend in the average thermometer scores for the middle class calculated separately for people who consider themselves working class and middle class. The trend lines for the two groups are parallel and the levels of favorability are virtually the same, indicating that both working and middle class people hold very positive views toward the middle class. Furthermore, the 2004 and 2008 feeling thermometer ratings of the working class (not shown) are even higher than the thermometer ratings of the middle class, with working class people averaging 83, and middle class people averaging 81.



Note: Question not asked in 1988 – 2000. Lines indicate average scores on the “middle class people” thermometer calculated separately for those who think of themselves as working class and middle class

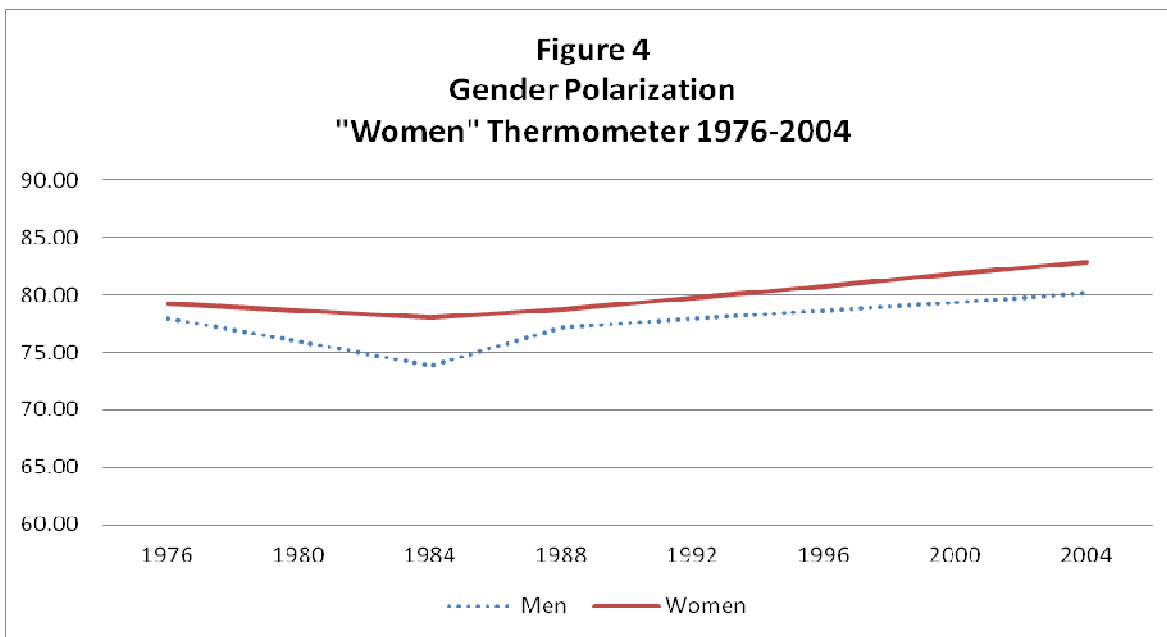
Overall, the class cleavage shows no trend toward polarization, no current polarization, and positive attitudes toward both groups. Recent research on party polarization finds that people in different social classes and income groups diverge substantially on economic issues, which influences their partisanship and voting (Bartels 2006, 2008). But, as with race, these issue differences have not spilled over into cultural (in this case, class) warfare or inter-group antipathy.

Age polarization could result from the putative “generational war” over issues such as the cost of entitlements for older Americans and increasing national debt. The thermometer about elderly people was asked in most years since 1976, but not the thermometer about young people, so polarization is measured as the difference between 18-34 year olds and those 65 or older in their feelings toward the elderly. Figure 3 shows that thermometer scores toward the elderly are stable among both 18-34 year-olds and those 65 and older. Moreover, the gap between these groups is small, averaging five points from 1976-2004. There appears to be a slight widening of the gap in 2000 and 2004, but that gap is only seven points; in 2004 a thermometer for young people was also asked, and the mean score was two points lower among the 18-34 group than the 65 and older group. In other words, both age groups are more favorable toward older than younger people, and the age groups are separated by only six points on a 200-point scale when the two 2004 thermometers are subtracted to form a pure polarization measure (not shown). These findings are virtually identical when only the very youngest (18-24) and oldest (75 and older) groups’ opinions are analyzed. Here again, there is no antipathy and no increase in antipathy between age groups.



Note: Question not asked in 1992. Lines indicate average scores on the “elderly” thermometer calculated separately for 18-34 year-olds and those who are 65 years old or older.

Gender polarization is presented in Figure 4. Recent electoral accounts have not emphasized the gender gap, but there are gender differences in spending priorities and foreign policy views. However, in the few years the ANES has asked a feeling thermometer for women (1976, 1984, 1988, and 2004), men and women have differed in average feelings toward women by only two points. A thermometer for men was asked only in 1976 and 2004. In both years men averaged three to six points lower in their scores than women, and in 2004 both men and women favored women over men by ten points on average. As with the cleavages of race, class, and age, there is no evidence of the putative polarization on gender



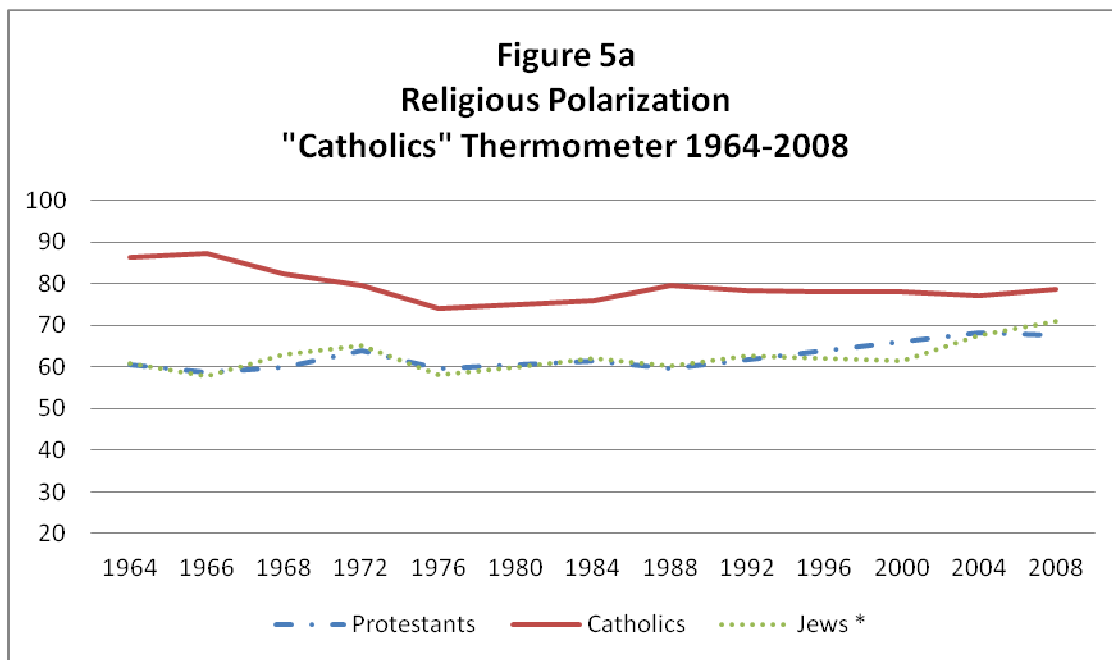
Note: Question not asked in 1980, 1992-2000. Lines indicate average scores on the “women” thermometer calculated separately for women and men.

Religion is a more complicated cleavage to analyze. Thermometers have been asked in the ANES often for Catholics and Jews, for Protestants only before 1980 and in 2000, and for Christian Fundamentalists consistently since just 1988. More problematic is inconsistency in the way survey respondents were asked about their religion, and the small number of Jewish respondents in the surveys due to their small percentage of the U.S. population. Thus there is insufficient data to break out members of mainline and evangelical or fundamentalist denominations, although they often differ in their views (Wald and Brown 2006).

Research on opinions about social issues and moral values often link them to religious identities, but find that the issue gaps between “traditionalists” and “modernists” are generally wider than those between denominational groups (Baker 2005, Layman et al. 2006). Thus, while this analysis of group antipathy may show polarization among religious groups, issue positions alone would not lead us to expect widening polarization.

Figures 5a through 5d show the trends in thermometers about four groups: Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and Christian Fundamentalists. In these three tables the thermometer scores are calculated separately for members of the three main denominations: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. I discuss polarization on each table, then summarize briefly the overall findings about religious group polarization, which point to mixed conclusions about the degree and trends in religious polarization. On all but one of the four thermometers the group ratings are above 50, in positive territory. In addition, on all four thermometers members of the in-group give the highest average score.

For example, as shown in Figure 5a, Catholics’ average score on the feeling thermometer for Catholics was ten points higher in 2008 than Protestants’ or Jews’ average scores on the Catholic thermometer. The gaps between the three groups have narrowed from 27 points in 1964 to ten points in 2004 and 2008. This indicates a decline, not an increase, in polarization.

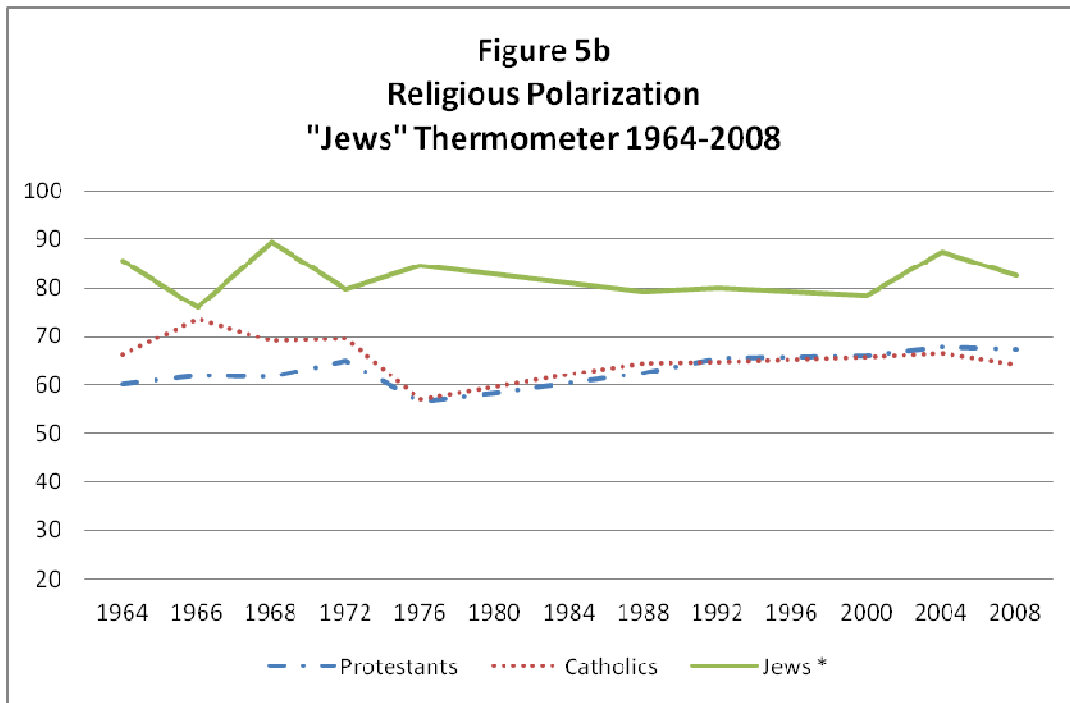


Note: Question not asked in 1980 and 1996. Lines indicate average scores on the “Catholics” thermometer calculated separately for members of the three different religious groups.

* The number of Jewish respondents (N) is 38-54 in 1964-1976, 16-30 in 1984-2008

Scores on the thermometer for Jews (Figure 5b) are more equivocal. Group differences fluctuated from 1964 to 1976, when they were at their widest, with a 28-point gap between Jews’ feelings of warmth toward Jews compared to the feelings of the other two groups toward Jews. That gap was more than halved to twelve points by 2000, but has since widened slightly. While the gap is currently almost twice that of the Catholic thermometer (Figure 5a), because there are so few Jewish survey respondents we cannot draw any firm conclusions about the degree of polarization among Jews and other groups.

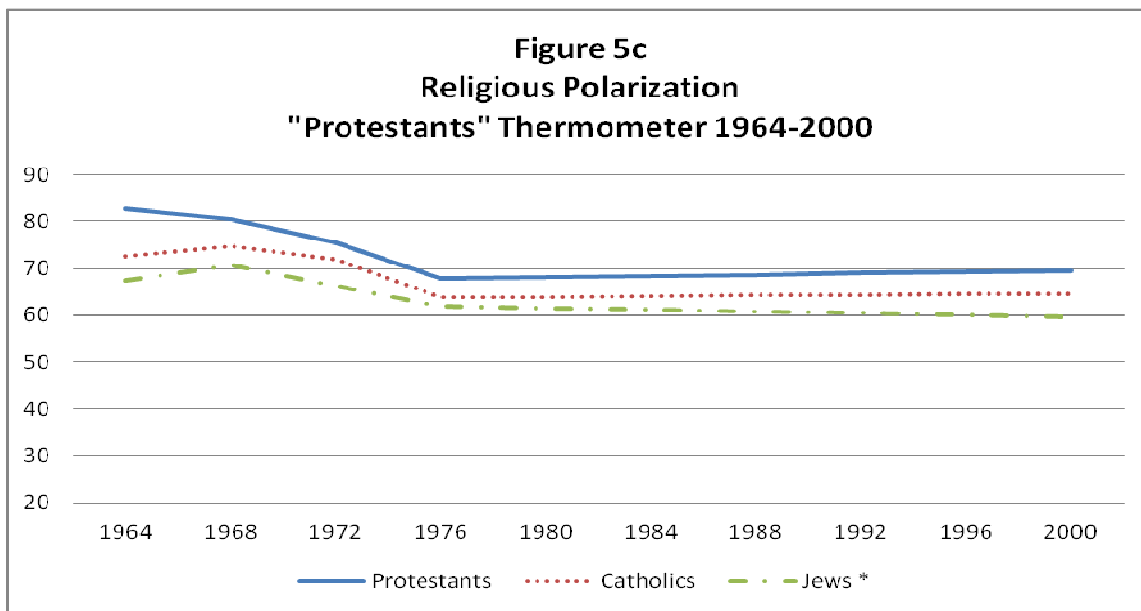
However, with some variation, the degree of group polarization appears to have declined since 1976 and has averaged sixteen points since 2000, hardly an indication of strong or widening intergroup antipathy.



Note: Question not asked in 1980, 1984 and 1996. Lines indicate average scores on the “Jews” thermometer calculated separately for members of the three different religious groups.

* The number of Jewish respondents (N) is 38-54 in 1964-1976, 16-30 in 1984-2008

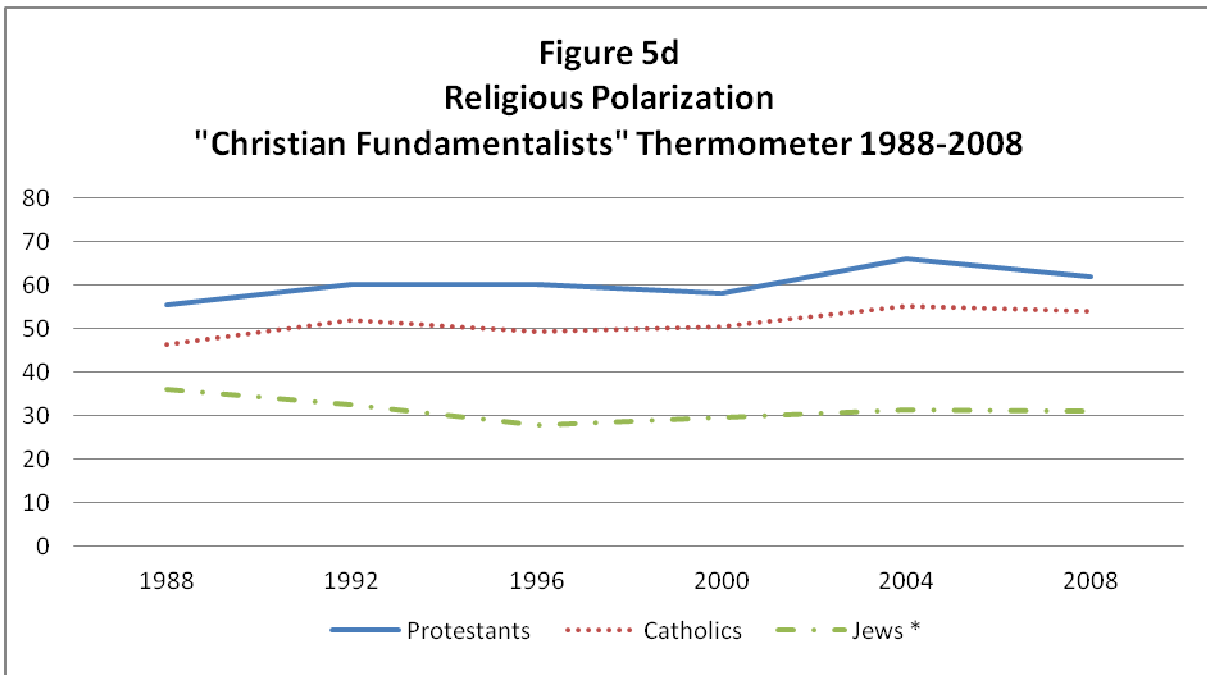
Figure 5c shows the thermometer for Protestants from 1964-1976 and 2000. The story is one of small and stable group differences from 1968-1976 and 2000. Protestants’ feelings toward other Protestants are about five points higher than Catholics’ feelings toward Protestants and about ten points higher than Jews’.



Note: Question not asked in 1980-1996 or 2004-2008. Lines indicate average scores on the “Protestants” thermometer calculated separately for members of the three different religious groups.

* The number of Jewish respondents (N) is 38-55 in 1964-1976, 14 in 2000

There is less positive feeling and less consensus on the thermometer for Christian Fundamentalists (Figure 5d). From 1988 to 2008, Protestant survey respondents’ average scores for Christian Fundamentalists have risen slightly from 55 to above 60. Catholics’ average score for Christian fundamentalists was 45 in 1988, on the negative side of the scale. Since then, Catholics’ average has risen about ten points, similar to the increase among Protestants, but over the period Catholics’ average score is more negative than for the other three religious group thermometers. There is greater negativity among the small numbers of Jewish respondents in each survey, whose average scores are consistently negative (below 50), ranging from 28 to 36. This is the largest difference among the three religious groups. Moreover, this is the only consistently negative evaluation of a group among the four religious group thermometers and five social cleavages.



* The number of Jewish respondents (N) is 14-29 . Lines indicate average scores on the “Christian Fundamentalists” thermometer calculated separately for members of the three different religious groups.

These findings are best understood in the context of research indicating that within all three religious communities there are important differences on issues, and that all three groups are grappling with divisions between traditionalists and “modernists.” In this vein, it is worth noting that on Figures 5a-5d, Protestant survey respondents give about the same average scores to Catholics and Jews as they do to Christian Fundamentalists, the one thermometer that refers to the potential traditional-modern cleavage. Yet despite the lower scores for the Fundamentalist thermometer and wide gaps, the average scores among the three denominations have been largely stable since 1992, as has the degree of polarization.

4. Conclusion and Implications

The debate over political polarization and cultural conflict has engaged issues of definition, interpretation, measurement, and meaning. This analysis has addressed these issues by evaluating the degree of and changes in inter-group favorability and antipathy among groups defined by five major social cleavages that have been implicated in the polarization debates. If the arguments about culture and other group-related “wars” becoming manifest among the mass public are correct, we would expect to see evidence of this in large gaps in people’s affective evaluations of their out-groups and a recent sharp widening of those gaps.

The results of my analysis produce no evidence to support this view, and on balance run contrary to those expectations in terms of both the size and trends in group polarization. With one exception, the average thermometer scores are positive for all groups, even for the out-groups. Most people have positive psychological orientations toward people in other social groups, whether defined by race, class, age, sex, or religion.

Moreover, levels of inter-group polarization are low and, if anything, decreasing over time. Racial group polarization has declined substantially since 1964, and has been largely stable and low since 1996. Group differences on the cleavages of class, age, and gender are negligible and stable. While there are some religious group differences, the size of the differences are generally small and either stable or decreasing. Members of the three main religious denominations favor their own in-groups more than their out-groups, but the gaps are generally around ten points or less. The most negative evaluations are of Christian Fundamentalists, and these evaluations are similar across members of all three other denominations, including Protestants.

The positivity of out-group evaluations and small and diminishing levels of polarization across all five cleavages offer no indication that intergroup differences on issues and partisan loyalties have become manifest at the deeper level of enduring group hostility. At a minimum, concerns are overblown that increasing social group polarization could result in direct inter-group conflict, “disuniting” the country or producing “culture wars” that cripple the parties’ and political system’s capacity to manage conflict, formulate and implement policy.

One of the main challenges in research on polarization and social groups is reconciling contradictions across the different tracks of research discussed at the start of this article, social groups and values versus political parties and elections. Research in this area often shows disconnects between attitudes that should logically be linked; for example, widely divergent moral visions based on absolutism and relativism are only weakly related to policy and party opinions (Baker 2005). There is also an emerging scholarly consensus of increasing “sorting” in terms of people matching their issue views to their party identification, yet without increasing polarization (Evans 2003, Carsey and Layman 2006, Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, Fiorina and Abrams 2008). My findings contribute to understanding these disconnects, by clearly showing that the mass public views members of social out-groups favorably, despite policy and partisan disagreements between social groups. This compartmentalization may set a limit on the intensity of future partisan political conflict and intergroup animosity

In their extensive 2006 review of polarization research, Layman et al. called for subnational and cross-national comparative research, and concluded by posing questions about whether “... longstanding differences between subgroups of the population [are] growing more intense,” and why there is no polarization of political attitudes while partisan polarization (or sorting) has increased (pp. 104-5). My findings indicate that in the U.S. subgroup differences at the fundamental level of inter-group antipathy are not growing more intense, and indeed there are not even longstanding intergroup hostilities. In turn, this ongoing lack of polarization in inter-group evaluations may help to explain the lack of polarization in political attitudes, as differences over issues between social groups are not reinforced or magnified by inter-group antagonisms. Far from polarization, these findings indicate comity and stability in intergroup relations and the possibility of future reductions in other kinds of political polarization.

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