**Does Polarization Affect Even the Inattentive? Assessing the Relationship Between Political Sophistication, Policy Orientations, and Elite Cues**

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Abstract: In this paper we focus on how individuals’ level of political sophistication conditions how they respond to growing elite polarization. The party coalitions in the electorate have become increasingly ideologically sorted. We assess whether all citizens have sorted into the ideologically “correct” partisan camp or whether this phenomenon is limited only to the highly sophisticated. Using a combination of ANES and DW-NOMINATE data we show that individuals of all sophistication levels have become more likely to identify with and vote for the party that best matches their policy orientations as a function of increasing elite-level polarization. Our findings suggest that the effects of increasing polarization are felt throughout the electorate.

Who notices when elites become more polarized? A good deal of political science scholarship demonstrates that most individuals only pay passing attention to politics. If this is the case, only the most politically attentive and sophisticated citizens might notice increasing polarization. This possibility generates considerable implications for democratic theory. If most citizens do not notice when elected officials adopt different positions, how is the citizenry supposed to hold elected officials accountable? We argue that while most Americans might not be avid consumers of political information, most individuals do pick up on elite cues if these cues are clear and sustained. We contend that the growing ideological divide between elites is such a cue and that citizens have responded. There is a considerable amount of evidence that the relationship between an individual’s partisanship and policy attitudes has strengthened as elite polarization has increased (Levendusky 2009; Zingher and Flynn 2018). The question we ask is whether the relationship between policy orientations and partisanship and voting behavior has strengthened among all citizens? Or, is this increase limited to the politically sophisticated?

Establishing the contours of this relationship will help to clarify some key questions regarding the dynamics of mass-elite linkages. Low sophistication citizens cannot be responsible for the partisan sort if they lack meaningful orientations or are incapable of responding to elite cues. If this is the case it is the politically engaged subset of the population is doing the sorting. However, we should not be too quick to write off the potential for low sophistication individuals to both hold policy orientations and rely on them to guide political choices. There is a school of thought that contends that nearly all individuals hold meaningful political orientations and are capable of drawing on these orientations when making political choices (Goren 2004; Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Goren 2013). If this is the case, the partisan sort extends beyond just the politically sophisticated and increasing elite polarization is reshaping the attitudes and behaviors of a wide swath of the electorate. We contend that citizens across all sophistication levels have sorted as a result of increasingly clear elite cues (Levendusky 2010).

Our effort to establish the contours of the relationship between policy orientations, sophistication, elite polarization, and mass attitudes and behaviors proceeds in four sections. First, we define political sophistication and policy orientations and then lay out the competing schools of thought about how political sophistication is thought to interact with an individual’s political orientations. Second, we outline a strategy for measuring orientations and sophistication. Third, we present an analysis of ANES data spanning 1972–2016 that tests the relationship between elite polarization, policy orientations, political sophistication, and several attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Additionally, we utilize DW-NOMINATE data to test how these relationships are conditioned by elite-level polarization. We find that the conditioning effect of policy orientations on elite polarization, and their consequences for attitudes and behaviors, is the strongest among the sophisticated, but we also find that the strength of the relationship has increased among those with medium and low levels of sophistication too. This finding implies that citizens across sophistication levels are driving the partisan sort. Finally, we discuss the implications of our analysis where we focus on the degree to which the entire electorate is affected by changes at the elite level.

**1.1 Political Sophistication and Policy Orientations**

Political sophistication is conceived of as “a combination of factual and associational political knowledge stored in long-term memory (Goren 2013, 58; Neuman 1986; Luskin 1987).” Political sophistication can be thought of as a combination of an individual’s mastery of the basic facts (i.e. what roles do specific political offices perform and who holds them) in addition an individual’s ability to link abstract and factual political knowledge (i.e. knowing the meaning of liberalism and conservatism and then being able to discern which party was more liberal/conservative than the other). The more politically sophisticated someone is the more facts they know and the better able they are use abstract concepts to make interconnections among these facts.

Policy orientations are defined as the proclivity to favor one course of government action over another, or to support specific types of policies and oppose others (Zingher and Flynn 2018; Goren 2013). Recent studies have demonstrated that individuals’ policy orientations are both widely held (Goren 2013), increasingly constrained (Jewitt and Goren 2015), and have become stronger predictors of attitudes and behavior over the past several decades (Adams 1997; Carsey and Layman 2006; Dancy and Goren 2010; Highton and Kam 2012; Zingher and Flynn 2018; Smidt 2017; Zingher 2018).[[1]](#footnote-1) An increasing proportion of individuals now hold policy orientations that match their partisan allegiances. Democrats have become increasingly likely to hold liberal policy orientations and evaluate the Republican Party negatively (Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009; Iyengar et al. 2012; Nicholson 2012; Mason 2018; Zingher and Flynn 2018).[[2]](#footnote-2) The opposite is true for Republicans. The party coalitions in the electorate have become more ideologically homogenous.

We argue that increasing polarization on the elite-level is driving this process. American political elites are currently more polarized than in any point in recent memory (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2009; Jacobson 2013). Poole and Rosenthal’s DW-NOMINATE scores rate the 115th Congress as the most polarized on record, as the parties have become both farther apart from one another ideologically, but also more unified internally.[[3]](#footnote-3) We contend that individuals have a harder time ignoring the disjunction between their own positions and those of the party they identify with (e.g. someone with conservative orientations that identifies as a Democrat) as the divisions between the parties become increasingly stark. The question is whether individual’s responses to increasing polarization are conditioned by their level of sophistication? We aim to establish how this relationship varies across individuals according to their level of political sophistication. In other words, which segment(s) of the electorate are driving the partisan sort? Has the relationship between policy orientations and vote choice/partisanship grown stronger among only the most sophisticated? Or have individuals across all sophistication levels experienced a similar increase? Or perhaps low sophistication citizens have experienced the most dramatic change?

**1.2 The Interaction Between Orientations and Sophistication**

Many explanations of changes in macro-level public opinion are rooted in the claim that changes in aggregate public opinion are driven by the changing opinions of the politically sophisticated (Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, Stimson, and MacKuen 2001). There is a considerable amount of research that demonstrates that attentiveness and receptiveness to elite cues varies as a function of political sophistication (Zaller 1992; Layman and Carsey 2002; Goren 2004; Layman et al. 2010). This claim is what is known as ‘sophistication-interaction hypothesis,’ which contends that how individuals process elite cues varies as a function of their level of political sophistication (Goren 2001, 162). The justification for this claim is straightforward—the politically sophisticated pay more attention to politics. They are generally better educated and are better able to grasp abstract political concepts and apply these concepts to evaluate policies and candidates. In short, political sophistication helps individuals to better process the political world.

If the sophistication-interaction hypothesis holds, we should expect policy orientations to influence the behaviors of the highly sophisticated much more so the unsophisticated. If low sophistication individuals are unable to connect policy orientations with specific candidates or policy proposals then they will have little effect on other attitudes or behaviors. Thus, we should not expect low sophistication citizens to sort in response to increasing elite polarization because they are not aware of, or able to process, changing elite cues. This is not a case of Converse’s non-attitudes, but a case of individuals not responding to elite cues (Zaller, 1992; Nicholson 2012). In order for sorting to occur, individuals must be able to connect their own orientations to the ‘correct’ party offering (i.e. recognize which choice is best matches their underlying orientations) or adopt the orientations that match the party they already identify with. The direction(s) of causation is the subject of an ongoing debate.

We work from the assumption that policy orientations are exogenous, and partisanship and vote choice are endogenous. This is a strong claim, and there are strong critics of this perspective (e.g. Lenz 2012) but a growing body of evidence supports it. Chen and Goren (2016), Goren and Chapp (2017), Tucker et al (2018), and Highton and Kam (2011) all use panel data to show that policy orientations shape partisanship (and often vice versa). That said, the empirical relationship we expect to observe between partisanship, policy orientations, and elite polarization is the same regardless of whether policy orientations shape partisanship or the partisanship shapes policy orientations or some combination of both. In this instance both perspectives produce observationally indistinguishable claims—we expect to observe a stronger relationship between policy orientations and partisanship as elite polarization increases. Rather, our theoretical and methodological interest herein lies in the conditioning effects of elite polarization and respondents’ sophistication, not in the causal direction between policy orientations and partisan identification or behavior. We would need panel data, opposed to cross-sectional data, to establish the direction of causality. That said, or assumption is in line with the several up to date findings from studies that employ a panel design. Either way, if unsophisticated individuals are unable to connect party positions with orientations they will be unlikely to update their partisanship identification or vote choice. Randomness cancels out in the aggregate. Thus, the expectation here is that to the extent sorting is occurring, it is the politically sophisticated doing the heavy lifting.

Yet, this sophistication-interaction hypothesis conflicts with an opposing set of findings that suggest that aggregate-level public opinion appears to move in a ‘rational’ way and that these movements in public opinion are not driven by just the politically sophisticated updating their beliefs. Measures of the public’s preferences for liberal or conservative policies such as Stimson’s (1999) Policy Mood have been shown to rise and fall as a function of economic performance (Durr 1993; Erikson, Stimson, and MacKuen 2002; Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Smidt, 2018). Opinions about the Second Iraq and Vietnam wars soured as the length, cost, and severity of the conflicts grew over time (Zaller 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992; Voeten and Brewer 2006). This ‘rational’ pattern extends to a broader range of foreign policy issues—an area that is especially associated with low levels of information (Page and Bouton 2006).

Studies have also revealed that wide swaths of the public respond to changing social and economic conditions. Enns and Kellstedt (2008) found that it was not just the changing attitudes of the sophisticated that drove changes in policy mood. They argued that it is true that the politically sophisticated can provide more accurate answers on questions regarding the state of the economy (e.g. they are more likely to know the current unemployment or inflation rate). However, all individuals are responsive to changes in economic conditions—people have a clear sense if things are getting better or worse (Enns and Kellstedt 2008, 438). The reason why “everybody moves mood” is because the majority of people have an intuition about the state of the economy and this in turn affects their attitudes towards the proper direction of public policy. The ‘cue’ is so blunt it is hard to ignore, even for the apolitical.

Key here is the idea that just because there is a strong relationship between policy orientations and partisan choice among highly sophisticated citizens does not mean that low sophistication citizens do not also lean on policy orientations (potentially to a lesser extent) or are unmoved by elite cues. In fact, there is reason to think that the relative change in the relationship between policy orientations and behavior in response to increasing elite polarization could be strongest among those with medium and low levels of sophistication. There is considerable evidence that high sophistication voters have already sorted into the correct partisan camp (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Their partisanship and policy orientations have been tightly linked for some time. This implies the existence of a ceiling effect. Those with lower levels of sophistication have more room for growth. The prediction here is that while the overall relationship between policy orientations and partisan choice is the strongest among the sophisticated, the magnitude of the change is the largest among the less sophisticated. This raises the possibility that those with low or middling levels of sophistication are finding their way into the partisan camp that best matches their orientations and driving the partisan sort, which seems realistic when considering the high levels of polarization among elites.

These differing arguments lead to starkly different predictions about the relationship we should expect between polarization, policy orientations, and vote choice/partisanship. The first possibility is that only the most sophisticated members of the electorate are capable of responding to elite cues. This is the expectation that flows from Page and Shapiro (1992), Erikson, Stimson, and MacKuen (2001) and numerous others and leads to the following hypothesis:

***H1***: As elite polarization increases, only those with high sophistication become more likely to support the party that best matches their policy orientations.

An alternative line of thought contends that all citizens are capable of responding to cues if the cues are clear and sustained. This expectation comports with Enns and Kellstedt’s (2008) findings related to policy mood—everyone has a general sense of how things are going and adjust their preferences accordingly. This leads to a competing hypothesis:

***H2***: As elite polarization increases, all individuals regardless of political sophistication become more likely to support the party that best matches their policy orientations.

Finally, it is also possible that the increasing ideological homogeneity of the party coalitions is due to citizens with low and moderate levels of sophistication finding their ways into the ‘correct’ partisan cap. According to this line of thought, individuals with high levels of sophistication are already likely to support the party that best matches their orientations, so those at lower sophistication levels must be driving any changes.

***H3***: As elite polarization increases, medium and low sophistication individuals exhibit the greatest increase in the likelihood of supporting the party that best matches their policy orientations.

**2. Data and Measurement**

We utilize two primary sources of data to construct our analysis. We rely on the ANES cumulative file as our source of individual level data (ANES, 2016). The ANES asks a wide variety of questions about attitudes, behaviors, and political knowledge, and the number and variety of these questions has generally increased over time. By 1972, the ANES began to ask enough questions regarding political knowledge and attitudes towards specific government policies to allow us to construct reliable measures of an individual’s level of political sophistication and policy orientations. We use these questions to build scales that measure an individual’s level of political sophistication as well as their policy orientations in presidential election years between 1972 and 2016.

We use Poole and Rosenthal’s DW-NOMINATE data (Lewis et al. 2018) to construct estimates of elite-level polarization. We operationalize elite-level polarization as the gap between the mean Republican and Democratic legislator in Congress for the given year (combined average of both houses). In the models using elite-level polarization, we utilize the change in polarization from one ANES cycle to the next in our models rather than the level of polarization. While elite polarization clearly trends with time, changes in polarization do not. Including the change in polarization, opposed to the absolute level, helps us to distinguish the effects of polarization from other variables that are positively trending over time.

**2.1 Measuring Political Sophistication**

With these considerations in mind, we utilize a battery of ANES questions to build a scale of political sophistication. Our basic approach follows the ones developed by Luskin (1987), Zaller (1992), and Goren (2013), among others. We build an additive scale that that combines questions that gauge an individual’s level of correct political knowledge (e.g. do they know the majority party in the House and/or Senate?) with questions gauging a respondent’s ability to think in abstract terms (e.g. are they able to place the Republican Party to the right of the Democratic Party on an ideological scale) in addition to the interviewer’s post-interview assessment of the respondent’s level of political sophistication (a full list of the questions used can be found in the supplemental appendix).[[4]](#footnote-4) The more correct answers an individual provides, the higher their score on the sophistication scale. Between 1988 and 2016 our battery consists of the same six questions. We use an additional seventh question for the years spanning 1972-1984. To account for the differences in item availability post-1984, we measure each respondent’s score as the percentage correct of the total possible the given year. We then standardize the distribution of scores within each year to help make uniform year-to-year comparisons.[[5]](#footnote-5) The standardized distribution of sophistication scores for all years is displayed in Figure 1. We then take these raw scores and break respondents down into high, medium, and low sophistication subsamples (defined as the top, middle, and bottom tertiles of respondents in a given year).[[6]](#footnote-6)

(Figure 1 Here)

**2.2 Measuring Policy Orientations**.

Having developed a measure of political sophistication, we now work towards developing an estimate of citizens’ policy orientations. Numerous studies of American public opinion have found that Americans’ orientations can be reduced to two basic dimensions—attitudes towards government involvement in the economy and attitudes towards the government’s role in upholding moral traditionalism. We lean on a battery of repeated ANES questions that span 1972-2016 to develop estimates of each individual’s positions along these two dimensions. The ANES asks respondents about their attitudes towards government intervention in the economy, aid to the poor and ethnic minorities, foreign policy, a woman’s role in society, gay rights, and government involvement in healthcare. Individuals are given an ordinal set of possible responses to choose from (e.g. Strongly oppose, oppose, neutral, support, strongly support). We use this battery of questions in conjunction with a measurement model to construct an estimate of each individual’s policy orientations.

We determine the dimensionality of the electorate’s policy orientations using confirmatory factor analysis. Factor analysis is a statistical technique that is used to uncover the latent dimensions that structure individual attitudes by examining the patterns of interrelationships that exist within a set of variables (Gorsuch 1974). Factor analysis has been used by a number of scholars to analyze ANES data in an effort to determine the dimensions that structure Americans’ policy orientations (Layman and Carsey 2002; Ansolabehere *et al* 2008; Layman *et al* 2010; Goren 2013; Zingher and Flynn 2018; Jewitt and Goren 2016; Zingher 2018). The results of the factor analyses reveal that there are two underlying dimensions that structure orientations. Questions concerning government involvement in the economy, healthcare, aid to the poor and African Americans, and Social Security, all load highly on this first dimension. Social issues, such as gay rights, abortion, and prayer in school, load highly on the second dimension.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The range of values on each dimension spans from about –3.75 to +3.75, with –3.75 being the most left/liberal and +3.75 being the most right/conservative. We use each individual’s factor score on the economic dimension and social dimensions as their policy orientations.[[8]](#footnote-8) Interestingly, the distribution of policy orientations does not change dramatically from year to year. The same is true for the pattern of responses to the constituent questions. While behaviors have become more polarized, policy orientations have not.

**3. The Conditioning Effect of Political Sophistication on the Relationship Between Elite-Level Polarization and Mass-Level Attitudes and Behaviors**

Having outlined our approach to measuring individuals’ underlying policy orientations, we now turn to our analysis of whether, and how, increasing elite-level polarization has affected mass attitudes and behaviors. There is considerable evidence that mass attitudes and behaviors have been affected by increasing polarization (Levenduksy 2010; Smidt 2017; Mason 2018; Zingher and Flynn 2018). The question we ask here is whether the effects of polarization on the electorate are homogenous, or if voters’ level of sophistication and political knowledge condition the effects of changing elite-level cues.

We present a series of analyses designed to test whether these changing elite cues have engendered changes on the mass level, and whether these mass level changes are confined to particular subsets of the electorate. The setup of these tests is straightforward. We present a series of models that pool all of our yearly samples from 1972-2016. Therefore, these models allow us to assess how an individual at a given point in policy space translates their policy orientations into attitudes and behaviors, and whether or not these behaviors are conditioned by changes in elite-level variables. For example, does the degree of change in elite polarization affect how individuals scoring a –1 on the underlying policy orientation variable translates those orientations into behaviors? Are they more likely, for example to vote Democratic in an election that is characterized by a dramatic increase in elite polarization? Our aim is to assess whether increasing elite polarization has led to mass-level sorting, and more importantly, are the effects of elite level polarization being felt across the entire electorate or in just a particularly sophisticated subset?

We utilize Poole and Rosenthal’s DW-NOMINATE scores to measure elite-level polarization. We operationalize elite-level polarization as follows. First, we calculate the distance between the mean Democratic and mean Republican House score in each Congress. As shown in Figure 2, the mean Republican and mean Democratic positions in Congress have diverged as the parties’ positions have become more ideologically distinct, with especially large increases post 1994 and 2008. Second, since polarization clearly trends positively over time it is possible that using the level of polarization in our regressions may simply be proxying some other unobserved, but similarly trended, variable. To address this problem, we use the *change in polarization* from one survey cycle to the next (e.g. 1972 to 1976) in our regression models. If voters are indeed responding to the stimulus of elite cues then we should expect to see spikes in elite polarization prompting similar spikes in mass attitudes and behaviors.

(Figure 2 Here)

To evaluate the possible conditional effects of elite-level changes in polarization we include three key sets of variables. First, we include an individual’s economic and social policy orientations as described above. Second, we include our measure of change in congressional polarization in an effort to capture the effects of changing elite positions and cues. Third, we also include the interactions between both an individual’s economic/social orientation and changes in elite polarization in order to assess whether how an individual translates their orientations into behaviors is conditional upon elite-level dynamics.

To answer the question of whether polarization is affecting a wide swath of the electorate or just a specific subsample, we divide our sample into low, medium, and high sophistication groups and run a separate regression for each group. This split sample design allows us to assess whether the relationship between mass level behaviors and elite messaging is conditional upon sophistication. We also include a battery of control variables to account for the effects of individual (race, income, religiosity, etc.) and national-level factors (Democratic vote share) on individual-level behavior.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We are interested in testing whether policy orientations meaningfully shape the political attitudes and behaviors across all sophistication levels. To answer this question, we display the results of four sets of models in Tables 1–3 and Figures 3–8. Each table and figure feature the results of a different set of models run on one of three dependent variables:

1) Partisan identification: A 7-point scale, 1 being strong Democrat and 7 being strong Republican;

2) Vote choice: Where 1 is voted Democrat and 0 Republican; and

3) Affect polarization: The difference in feeling thermometer ratings of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party (i.e. Democratic Score – Republican Score), with possible ratings ranging from –100 (a highly hostile rating of the Democratic Party) to +100 (a highly favorable rating of the Democratic Party).

We use both the seven-point partisan identification and the difference in the feeling thermometers in an effort to assess whether changes in elite polarization shape both long term identities (PID) and short-term partisan evaluations (the difference between in-party and out-party feeling thermometers, see Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen, 2012; Banda and Cluverius 2018).

When estimating the models of partisan self-identification, we use an ordered probit model, given the ordinal nature of the outcome variables in question. We estimate the vote choice model using a binomial probit. Last, we use a linear regression model to estimate affect polarization scores.

(Tables 1, 2, and 3 here)

These analyses contain a number of interesting findings. The most basic (and important) conclusion that we draw from these models is that changes in elite polarization affect all sophistication groupings in a similar way, across a wide range of outcomes. First, the polarization change variable is only significant in the pooled sophistication model in Table 1, and in the pooled and high sophistication groups in Table 2. Further, the magnitude of the coefficient for the high sophistication group is considerably larger than the other sophistication groupings in Table 2.

Our ability to interpret this is limited given the interaction term, but the normalized structure of the policy orientation variable does simplify this task somewhat. For now, we can say that there is some evidence that increases in elite polarization have a statistically significant and negative effect among policy orientation moderates (those with a score of 0). The results from Tables 1 and 2 indicate that policy orientation moderates are less likely to identify as strong Republicans and are more likely to vote for Democratic presidential candidates, as elite polarization increases.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Voter sophistication also appears to have a conditioning effect on the relationship between elite polarization and how voters’ policy orientations translate into attitudes and behaviors. To ease the process of translating our findings into something more substantively meaningful, we plot the marginal effects of the polarization change variable across the range of individuals’ policy orientation scores in Figures 3 and 4. The figures below display the discrete change in predicted probabilities of 1) individuals self-identifying as a strong Republican (Figure 3); 2) individuals voting for the Democratic presidential candidate (Figure 4); and 4) affect polarization scores (Figure 5) as a function of increasing the polarization change variable from 0 to its maximum across the range of the individual policy orientation variables. Within each figure, the top row of panels shows the marginal effect of an increase in the polarization change variable across the range of the first-dimension policy orientation scores, while the bottom row shows the marginal effect of an increase in the polarization change variable across the range of the second-dimension policy orientation scores. Each row shows the marginal effect for the 1) pooled sample, 2) low sophistical individuals, 3) medium sophistication individuals, and 4) high sophistication individuals.

We find three important dynamics: First, we find that an increase in elite-level polarization generally correlates with a statistically significant change in individual-level behaviors. Second, we find that the magnitude of the effect of increasing elite polarization is in many cases conditioned by the first-dimension individual policy orientation scores. Third, we find that in some cases the effect of increasing elite polarization is further conditioned by individuals’ political sophistication, while in other cases we find effects that are generally constant across sophistication groupings. Ultimately, we find little evidence that the second-dimension policy orientation scores exert a statistically significant conditioning effect on individual behavior for any of the three outcomes we look at.

First, consider the Party ID dependent variable. Across all sophistication groups we find that an increase in elite-level polarization leads to a slight decrease in the probability that individuals with liberal policy orientations identify as a strong Republican, and an increase in the probability that individuals with more conservative policy orientations identify as strong Republicans. Notably, the magnitude of the positive effect for individuals with conservative policy orientations increases as those policy orientations become *more* conservative. For example, when we look at individuals on the first dimension, the marginal effect of polarization change is statistically significantly larger for individuals with a policy orientation score of 3.5 than it is for individuals with a policy orientation score of 1.[[11]](#footnote-11) This statistically significant change in the magnitude of the effect holds for all three sophistication groupings. Importantly, we do not find that sophistication exhibits a statistically significant conditioning effect for Party ID. Tests of the difference in the interaction coefficients fail to produce statistically significant findings for this set of models. Overall this suggests that elite cues are conditioned by individuals’ underlying policy orientations, and that these effects are relatively similar across sophistication groupings.

Next, consider the Democratic vote choice dependent variable. Here we find that increasing elite-level polarization leads to an increase in the probability that individuals with liberal policy orientations vote for the Democratic candidate in presidential elections. Similarly, our results indicate that increasing elite-level polarization leads to a decrease in the probability that individuals with right-leaning policy orientation scores vote for the Democratic candidate in presidential elections. These results hold across all sophistication levels when looking at the first-dimension policy orientation scores. We find generally null results for the second-dimension scores. We also find that the magnitude of the effects changes across the range of the first-dimension policy orientation variable, but only for the high sophistication group. Here we find a statistically significant larger effect for *more moderate* individuals (score of –1 or 1) than individuals with stronger liberal/conservative scores (scores of –3.5 or 3.5). Substantively this means that increasing elite polarization leads to a larger change in the voting behavior of high sophistication individuals with more moderate policy orientation scores as compared to high sophistication individuals with more liberal/conservative scores. This may reflect the fact that individuals with stronger policy orientation scores have already identified which party best matches their preferences during presidential elections. Finally, significance tests indicate that there is some evidence of a conditioning effect of sophistication on vote choice. The interaction coefficient between polarization change and policy orientations is substantively and statistically significantly larger in the high sophistication group than the coefficients in the medium or low sophistication groups. There is no statistically significant difference between the coefficients in the medium and low sophistication groupings. Substantively, this indicates that the most attentive individuals appear to respond most strongly to changing elite cues when deciding for whom they will vote.

Last, we consider affect polarization. As Figure 5 shows, we find that increases in elite polarization generally have a statistically significant effect on individuals’ affect polarization scores, and that individuals’ first dimension policy orientation scores condition this effect. We find that there is a statistically significant increase in the magnitude of the effect of increasing elite polarization across the range of the first-dimension policy orientation scores. The way our dependent variable is measured we can think of this as a “net favorability” rating for the Democratic Party. As we can see in Figure 5, increasing elite polarization leads to increasing favorability ratings of the Democratic Party among individuals with liberal policy orientations (i.e. ≤ 0), but this effect is larger for more individuals with larger policy orientation scores than for those with more centrist policy orientation scores. We see the opposite for individual with more conservative policy orientation scores; individuals with higher scores have a lower net favorability rating of the Democratic Party than individuals with more centrist scores. Concerning the conditioning effects of political sophistication, we do not find any statistically significant difference in the effects of elite polarization and individual policy orientations across model groupings, suggesting that the relationship between increasing elite polarization and policy orientation is generally unaffected by individuals’ political knowledge. Also, we find a similar pattern of results when we examine short term and long-term partisan evaluations, which should help to alleviate some concerns about the endogeneity of partisanship vis-à-vis policy orientations.

Lastly, to help illustrate the within- and between-group changes in a slightly different way, Figures 6, 7, and 8 present the predicted probability of self-identifying as a strong Republican (Figure 6), the predicted probability of a Democratic vote (Figure 7) and affect polarization (Figure 8) for the pooled sample and the three political sophistication sub-samples. Each panel shows the predicted value for a prototypical liberal and conservative voter according to the first-dimension policy orientation scores under conditions of low and high polarization change.[[12]](#footnote-12)

(Figures 6, 7, and 8 Here)

Figure 6 shows that we can generally expect individuals with more conservative policy orientation scores to be more likely to self-identify as strong Republicans as compared to individuals with more liberal policy orientation scores. This general pattern holds across all sophistication levels. First, these figures help to illustrate that larger changes in polarization lead to greater divergence in the electorate’s behavior. Increases in elite-level polarization lead individuals with liberal policy orientation scores to be less likely to self-identify as strong Republicans. Overall the substantive magnitude of these changes is modest as the baseline probability is already low for individuals with liberal policy orientations. On the other hand, we find some evidence that increasing elite polarization increases the probability that conservative policy orientation scores translate into a strong Republican response. High sophistication individuals with conservative policy orientation scores have a relatively high baseline predicted value for conditions of low polarization change and increases in elite polarization do increase the predicted probability that these individuals self-identify as strong Republicans, but this shift is relatively modest—approximately increasing by 6 percentage points. The shift for medium sophistication conservatives is slightly smaller, at approximately 4 percentage points. Last, the shift for low sophistication conservatives is an increase of approximately 3 percentage points. These within-group changes are statistically significant at the 0.05 level for liberal individuals across all sophistication groups and right-leaning individuals in the high sophistication group. In general, out results indicate that the high sophistication group is the most highly polarized in terms of differences in partisan self-identification between liberal and conservative individuals, but it also shows the largest changes within-group change in response to increasing elite polarization. The takeaway here is that larger increases in elite-level polarization appear to be driving individuals away from the center to identify as stronger partisans, and these shifts are most affecting high sophistication citizens.

We find similar patterns when looking at the Democratic vote outcome. As we can see from Figure 7, increases in elite-level polarization increase the probability that liberal voters vote for a Democratic candidate, and decrease the probability that conservative voters vote for a Democratic candidate. Additionally, the probability that a conservative voter votes for a Democratic candidate is highest among the low sophistication group and lowest in the high sophistication grouping. For low sophistication individuals we find that increasing elite-level polarization produces a within-group increase of 16 percentage points in the probability that an individual will vote for a Democratic presidential candidate. Alternatively, the same change in elite polarization produces a decrease of approximately 7 percentage points among conservative individuals. For medium sophistication individuals an increase in elite polarization produces an increase of approximately 14 percentage points for liberal individuals, and a decrease of 8 percentage points for conservative individuals. Among high sophistication groups we find an increase of 18 percentage points for liberal individuals and a decrease of 11 percentage points for conservative individuals. These within-group changes are statistically significant at the 0.05 level across all sophistication levels for liberal individuals, but only statistically significant for high sophistication conservatives. Again, we find some evidence that the high sophistication individuals are the most polarized group, but we also find that they exhibit the largest changes to elite-level polarization.

Lastly, the results in Figure 8 show the results for our affect polarization models. We find a general pattern here that mirrors the results from the previous models. Increasing elite-level polarization generally correlates with higher net favorability ratings of the Democratic Party among liberal individuals, and lower net favorability ratings of the Democratic Party among conservative individuals. For low sophistication individuals, we see increasing elite polarization produce an increase of approximately 9 points among liberal individuals and a decrease of approximately 7 points among conservative individuals. For the medium sophistication group, we find an increase of approximately 6 points for liberal individuals and a decrease of 6 points for conservative individuals. Among high sophistication individuals we find an increase of approximately 6 points for liberal individuals and a decrease of approximately 10 points for conservative individuals. These within-group changes are statistically significant at the 0.05 level for liberal individuals in the low and medium sophistication groupings, and for conservative individuals in the medium and high sophistication groupings. The overall patterns resemble those found in Figures 6 and 7—high sophistication individuals exhibit the largest baseline affect polarization scores. We also find some mixed evidence that higher sophistication individuals exhibit larger changes in affect polarization in response to elite polarization than do less sophisticated individuals. However, this difference is relatively modest.

Ultimately, 1) voters of all sophistication levels are responding to increasing elite polarization, and 2) high sophistication voters may be the most sensitive to changing elite polarization. These is likely due to the fact that high sophistication individuals are the most finely attuned to elite messaging, and therefore are more likely to respond quickly and sharply to substantial increases elite polarization. This finding is in line with hypothesis ***H2****.* While it if true that high sophisticates exhibit the strongest response, all other sophistication groupings respond too, which contradicts **H1**. Our results do not support **H3**.Overall, our analysis suggests that increasing elite polarization affects all segments of the electorate and elicits the largest relative changes in behavior from those in higher sophistication groupings.

**4. Discussion and Conclusions**

Americans have become more behaviorally polarized. This is true of those who know a lot about politics and those who know comparatively little. All sophistication groups have responded to increasing elite polarization by exhibiting more polarized attitudes and behaviors. However, we find some evidence that increasing elite polarization has the overall strongest effect on the attitudes and behaviors of those with higher levels of sophistication. Even if we assume that the distribution of policy orientations has remained stable (i.e. the distribution of policy orientations has not become more polarized), the way these orientations translate into behaviors has changed a great deal. Individuals might not have drastically different perspectives about what the government should be doing compared to previous eras, but these policy orientations are now more strongly linked with partisanship and vote choice.

Perhaps the most important takeaway is that while elite polarization may impact high sophistication groups most strongly, it also affects citizens that lack both abstract and concrete political knowledge. It is important that we put this result in context. All three of our dependent variables and primary independent variables are broad constructs. The increase in polarization has unfolded over a period of decades. Debates over policy are often both technically involved and temporally limited, so it makes sense that most Americans do not have a deep working understanding of policy issues. However, elite polarization is a much more basic, non-technical, and long-lasting cue. The parties have become consistently more divided across a wide range of issues. Moreover, these divisions are not just over policy. American politics have become more visceral, angrier, and generally less consensual (Mason, 2018). This increase in vitriol and division is difficult to avoid. These changes make it increasingly easy for individuals to see where the partisan battle lines are drawn and to identify which party best represents their ‘side.’ Therefore, it is not particularly surprising that elites’ polarized cues have trickled down to even the unsophisticated.

Overall, our findings show that individuals hold meaningful policy orientations, connect these orientations with attitudes and behaviors, and these relationships have become stronger. We also demonstrate that these findings extend across sophistication subgroups, with some limited evidence that higher sophistication groups respond more strongly to increasingly polarized elite cues. These findings have important normative connotations. Democracy is rooted in the principle that the electors have control over the nature and direction of public policy. The principle rests on an unsteady foundation if only a select subset of the electorate is able translate their core orientations into substantive evaluations of the government. These findings suggest that the majority of the public increasingly knows where the parties stand and hold policy orientations that are consistent with their partisan choices. Our analysis suggests that polarization affects the entirety of the electorate.

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Table 1: Ordered Probit Models Regressing PID on Policy Orientations and Changes in Elite Polarization—by Sophistication Tertile

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All | Low | Medium | High |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Δ Polarization | -0.672\* | -1.007 | -0.255 | -0.920 |
|  | (0.346) | (0.638) | (0.556) | (0.770) |
| Individual First Dimension | 0.405\*\*\* | 0.141\*\*\* | 0.385\*\*\* | 0.568\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0136) | (0.0269) | (0.0225) | (0.0242) |
| Δ Polarization\*Individual First Dimension | 2.746\*\*\* | 2.658\*\*\* | 1.779\*\*\* | 3.052\*\*\* |
|  | (0.346) | (0.749) | (0.565) | (0.640) |
| Individual Second Dimension | 0.123\*\*\* | -0.0112 | 0.121\*\*\* | 0.211\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0131) | (0.0248) | (0.0219) | (0.0246) |
| Δ Polarization\*Individual Second Dimension | 0.720\*\* | 0.0918 | 0.197 | 1.202\* |
|  | (0.331) | (0.684) | (0.534) | (0.648) |
| Education | 0.130\*\*\* | 0.0687\*\*\* | 0.129\*\*\* | 0.127\*\*\* |
|  | (0.00997) | (0.0209) | (0.0164) | (0.0190) |
| Income | 0.0288\*\*\* | 0.00852 | 0.0225\*\* | 0.0552\*\*\* |
|  | (0.00685) | (0.0125) | (0.0111) | (0.0126) |
| South | -0.0970\*\*\* | -0.160\*\*\* | -0.107\*\*\* | -0.0427 |
|  | (0.0185) | (0.0315) | (0.0307) | (0.0354) |
| Non-White | -0.303\*\*\* | -0.354\*\*\* | -0.267\*\*\* | -0.422\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0184) | (0.0321) | (0.0305) | (0.0345) |
| Democratic Vote Share | -0.643\*\*\* | -0.638\*\* | -0.811\*\*\* | -0.729\*\* |
|  | (0.183) | (0.310) | (0.298) | (0.346) |
| Cut 1 | -1.032\*\*\* | -1.318\*\*\* | -1.091\*\*\* | -1.038\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0916) | (0.158) | (0.148) | (0.176) |
| Cut 2 | -0.425\*\*\* | -0.637\*\*\* | -0.482\*\*\* | -0.501\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0917) | (0.158) | (0.148) | (0.176) |
| Cut 3 | -0.0161 | -0.253 | -0.0803 | -0.00902 |
|  | (0.0916) | (0.158) | (0.148) | (0.175) |
| Cut 4 | 0.328\*\*\* | 0.298\* | 0.205 | 0.186 |
|  | (0.0915) | (0.158) | (0.148) | (0.175) |
| Cut 5 | 0.739\*\*\* | 0.676\*\*\* | 0.594\*\*\* | 0.709\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0916) | (0.159) | (0.148) | (0.174) |
| Cut 6 | 1.305\*\*\* | 1.303\*\*\* | 1.202\*\*\* | 1.247\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0919) | (0.161) | (0.149) | (0.174) |
| Observations | 16216 | 5210 | 5984 | 5022 |
| Log-Likelihood | -28907.0 | -9371.2 | -10847.8 | -8097.2 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses: \* p<.10 \*\* p<.05 \*\*\* p<.01

**Table 2: Probit Models Regressing Vote Choice on Policy Orientations and Changes in Elite Polarization—by Sophistication Tertile**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All | Low | Medium | High |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Δ Polarization | 1.519\*\* | 1.484 | 1.171 | 3.407\*\* |
|  | (0.657) | (1.315) | (0.936) | (1.431) |
| Individual First Dimension | -0.608\*\*\* | -0.345\*\*\* | -0.506\*\*\* | -0.813\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0271) | (0.0571) | (0.0414) | (0.0540) |
| Δ Polarization\*Individual First Dimension | -4.968\*\*\* | -3.697\*\* | -3.542\*\*\* | -8.431\*\*\* |
|  | (0.826) | (1.829) | (1.151) | (1.839) |
| Individual Second Dimension | -0.300\*\*\* | -0.166\*\*\* | -0.269\*\*\* | -0.427\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0221) | (0.0482) | (0.0348) | (0.0422) |
| Δ Polarization\*Individual Second Dimension | -1.187\* | 0.898 | -1.631\* | -1.361 |
|  | (0.611) | (1.424) | (0.909) | (1.319) |
| Education | -0.167\*\*\* | -0.110\*\*\* | -0.179\*\*\* | -0.107\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0161) | (0.0355) | (0.0253) | (0.0299) |
| Income | -0.0689\*\*\* | -0.0354 | -0.0476\*\*\* | -0.105\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0114) | (0.0230) | (0.0175) | (0.0205) |
| South | -0.0173 | -0.0376 | 0.0415 | -0.0850 |
|  | (0.0311) | (0.0599) | (0.0482) | (0.0587) |
| Non-White | 0.516\*\*\* | 0.630\*\*\* | 0.468\*\*\* | 0.577\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0308) | (0.0636) | (0.0479) | (0.0570) |
| Democratic Vote Share | 4.544\*\*\* | 4.904\*\*\* | 4.424\*\*\* | 4.396\*\*\* |
|  | (0.304) | (0.564) | (0.467) | (0.566) |
| Constant | -1.635\*\*\* | -1.942\*\*\* | -1.666\*\*\* | -1.722\*\*\* |
|  | (0.152) | (0.288) | (0.232) | (0.282) |
| Observations | 11428 | 2699 | 4256 | 4473 |
| Log-Likelihood | -5535.3 | -1419.9 | -2297.7 | -1642.0 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses: \* p<.10 \*\* p<.05 \*\*\* p<.01

**Table 3: OLS Models Regressing Affect Polarization on Policy Orientations and Changes in Elite Polarization—by Sophistication Tertile**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All | Low | Medium | High |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Δ Polarization | -5.909 | 18.15 | 3.599 | -17.49 |
|  | (11.55) | (20.91) | (19.09) | (23.07) |
| Individual First Dimension | -16.45\*\*\* | -7.293\*\*\* | -15.09\*\*\* | -20.88\*\*\* |
|  | (0.462) | (1.027) | (0.781) | (0.709) |
| Δ Polarization\*Individual First Dimension | -78.92\*\*\* | -77.70\*\*\* | -66.42\*\*\* | -81.54\*\*\* |
|  | (10.82) | (24.08) | (19.15) | (17.03) |
| Individual Second Dimension | -6.868\*\*\* | -0.296 | -6.344\*\*\* | -10.38\*\*\* |
|  | (0.471) | (0.950) | (0.804) | (0.800) |
| Δ Polarization\*Individual Second Dimension | -3.648 | -23.71 | -12.96 | 19.29 |
|  | (10.92) | (22.97) | (18.39) | (19.77) |
| Education | -2.166\*\*\* | -0.181 | -3.339\*\*\* | -0.990 |
|  | (0.356) | (0.752) | (0.587) | (0.626) |
| Income | -1.552\*\*\* | -0.877\* | -1.580\*\*\* | -1.992\*\*\* |
|  | (0.246) | (0.458) | (0.402) | (0.410) |
| South | -0.532 | 1.174 | -0.0803 | -2.074\* |
|  | (0.668) | (1.163) | (1.104) | (1.152) |
| Non-White | 10.40\*\*\* | 11.73\*\*\* | 9.037\*\*\* | 13.05\*\*\* |
|  | (0.653) | (1.172) | (1.073) | (1.102) |
| Democratic Vote Share | 57.14\*\*\* | 83.63\*\*\* | 24.94\* | 62.19\*\*\* |
|  | (7.534) | (13.36) | (12.82) | (12.21) |
| Constant | -14.45\*\*\* | -33.68\*\*\* | 4.969 | -20.36\*\*\* |
|  | (3.761) | (6.662) | (6.354) | (6.211) |
| Observations | 13528 | 4190 | 4932 | 4406 |
| R-Squared | 0.303 | 0.120 | 0.244 | 0.499 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses: \* p<.10 \*\* p<.05 \*\*\* p<.01

**Figure 1: The Standardized (Z-scored) Distribution of Sophistication Scores 1972–2016**

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**Figure 2: Mean Congressional ideological position by party, difference in party means (polarization), and change in polarization between congresses.**

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Figure 3: The marginal effect of a change in political polarization on the probability of identifying as a strong Republican across sophistication levels. Dependent variable is the 7-point party self-identification variable. Plot depicts the discrete change in the probability of obtaining a score of 7 (a strong Republican) as an observed outcome. Polarization change increases from 0 to maximum value.



Figure 4: The marginal effect of elite polarization on the predicted probability of Democratic vote choice across sophistication levels. Dependent variable is the dichotomous Democratic Vote variable, with 1 indicating a vote for a Democratic presidential candidate, and 0 indicate otherwise. Polarization change increases from 0 to maximum value. Marginal effect is calculated as the discrete change in predicted probabilities. 

**Figure 5: The marginal effect of elite polarization on the predicted level of affect polarization across sophistication levels. Dependent variable is the affect polarization score representing the difference in feeling thermometer ratings of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party (i.e. Democratic Score – Republican Score). Possible ratings range from –100 to +100.**

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Figure 6: Predicted probability of self-identifying as a “strong Republican” by sophistication level. Each figure shows the predicted probability for “ideal type” liberal and conservative voters under conditions of low polarization change and high polarization change. First dimension policy orientation scores set to –1 for liberal voters and +1 for conservative citizens. Second dimension scores held at mean values. Remaining control variables held at mean, medians, or modal values.



Figure 7: Predicted probability of Democratic vote choice by sophistication level. Each figure shows the predicted probability for “ideal type” liberal and conservative voters under conditions of low polarization change and high polarization change. First dimension policy orientation scores set to –1 for liberal voters and +1 for conservative citizens. Second dimension scores held at mean values. Remaining control variables held at mean, medians, or modal values.



Figure 8: Predicted affect polarization score by sophistication level. Each figure shows the predicted value for “ideal type” liberal and conservative voters under conditions of low polarization change and high polarization change. First dimension policy orientation scores set to –1 for liberal voters and +1 for conservative citizens. Second dimension scores held at mean values. Remaining control variables held at mean, medians, or modal values.



1. We present an analysis in the supplemental appendix that demonstrates individuals across all sophistication levels hold meaningful policy orientations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note that we generally use “liberal” and “conservative” to refer to left-leaning and right-leaning policy orientations throughout the manuscript. We specifically highlight when we use these terms to refer to ideological self-identification where appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is possible there is a reciprocal relationship between mass and elite polarization. Some, including Jacobson (2012) have noted that elites might be becoming more polarized in response to increasing mass polarization. However, multiple analyses demonstrate that elites are 1) more ideologically constrained 2) more polarized than the masses. Moreover, we later show that the distribution of policy orientations within the electorate has not become more polarized. These points of evidence suggest that the masses are becoming more behaviorally polarized in response to changing elite cues, opposed to driving elite polarization. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One interesting finding is that there has been no discernable trend in individuals’ raw (i.e. non-normalized) sophistication scores. Political sophistication has seemingly not increased despite an increase in overall education levels. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The ANES includes online-only category of survey respondents in more recent survey cycles. These respondnets produce an abnormally high concentration of observations clustered around +1 on the normalized sophistication scale. To avoid biasing our results and to make sure that our measures are comparable across the span of the survey cycles, we exclude these online-only respondents from our analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One potential concern with using such a long span of ANES data is that the ANES’s response rate has decreased markedly over time. This decline in response rate raises the possibility that citizens that are more politically sophisticated than average are the ones actually responding to the survey. There is a possibility that our findings are driven by the presence of selection bias among ANES respondents. We present several analyses in the appendix that help to account for this possibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The set of questions available in the ANES varies from year to year. However, we took several steps to ensure that the results of the factor analysis are comparable from year to year. Please see the supplemental appendix for more details. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One question important question to ask here is: Do low sophistication individuals’ responses hang together and form two underlying dimensions? It could be that these results are being driven by the highly sophisticated and the less sophisticated see no connection between the items. We address this question in appendix A1, where we run a separate factor analysis for each sophistication level. We find that the factor loadings are similar across sophistication groupings. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Including this battery of individual-level control variables helps to account for other trends that might be occurring during the same time period and helps to ease some concerns surrounding omitted variable bias. For instance, the electorate has become progressively more educated over the past 40 years and it is possible that this increased level of education is has created an electorate that is more adept at interpreting elite cues. Controlling for a respondent’s level of education helps to address the possibility. Likewise, including a control for non-white respondents helps to address the potential consequences of changing demographics. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We also replicated this analysis using a model that included the absolute level of polarization as well as a three-way interaction term between policy orientations, absolute level of polarization, and polarization change. We found that policy orientations became a stronger predictor of PID/vote choice as the absolute level of polarization increased and in response to increases in polarization. One interesting finding was that the effect of polarization change decreased as the absolute level of polarization increased, which likely points to the existence of a saturation effect. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Test statistic indicates *p ≤ 0.05.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Liberal and conservative voters are defined according to the first-dimension policy orientation scores. Liberal voter values are set to –1 and conservative voter values are set to +1. Remaining values are held at their mean, median, or modal values. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)