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Convergence and divergence in state political behavior, 1970–2004

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Abstract

In view of the ongoing debate about the degree and direction of political polarization in the U.S., we assess whether the 50 states are converging or diverging in their behavior in state and federal elections. We find that states are diverging in their behavior in federal elections but converging in their behavior in state elections. Previous scholars have shown the need to distinguish between the degree of polarization of elites and ordinary citizens. Our findings demonstrate the further need to distinguish between trends in partisan polarization at the federal and state level.

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The thin margins of victory and the stability of electoral vote allocations in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections generated journalistic commentary that the nation was evenly divided and polarized into “red” and “blue” states. There is certainly reason to conclude from these elections that support for the two parties has been evenly divided. The presidential candidates in 2000 were separated by a mere 537 votes in Florida and 0.5% in the national popular vote. Then, in 2004 the election hinged on 120,000 votes in Ohio and produced a vote margin of less than 5 percentage points in 10 other states and only a 2.5% split in the national popular vote. It is just as plausible to conclude from these elections that Americans had become polarized into “red” and “blue” voting blocs. After all, only three states changed their support for Republican and Democratic candidates between 2000 and 2004 (New Hampshire shifted to the Democrats and Iowa and New Mexico shifted to the Republicans). Further, victory margins exceeded 20 percentage points in 17 states in 2004.

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These lines of analysis point in different directions, however. Do the tight margins of victory, both in the nation and in battleground states, indicate that the country is becoming less polarized in that the 50 states are converging in their political views? Or do the stability of electoral vote allocations and significant margins between the candidates in a number of uncompetitive states suggest that the country is becoming more polarized in that the states are diverging in their political views?

Utilizing a recently developed measure, the Major Party Index (MPI), we find that state electorates are diverging in their behavior in federal elections but converging in their behavior in state elections. We therefore verify the increasing levels of polarization that many analysts have perceived in federal elections, but also demonstrate that this has not translated into similar levels of polarization in state elections, where state electorates are converging in their behavior.

1. The scholarly debate about political polarization

A number of scholars have investigated the degree to which the American electorate has become more polarized in recent years (see, e.g., [Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder 2006](#); [Glaeser & Ward, 2006](#); [Nivola & Brady, 2006](#)). [Fiorina, Abrams and Pope \(2006\)](#) relied primarily on survey data in concluding that although elites are polarized, the general public is neither polarized geographically nor becoming more polarized over time. However, [McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal \(2006\)](#), relying on their NOMINATE measure of congressional voting behavior, find that there has been increasing polarization along a liberal/conservative continuum. Still other scholars have relied on election results to demonstrate that inter-party competitiveness in state-level elections has been increasing. As noted by [Bibby and Schaffner \(2008, p. 58\)](#), the number of states designated as uncompetitive for either the Republican or Democratic Party on the basis of gubernatorial and state legislative election results declined dramatically since the 1960s.

The challenge in sorting through these various results is that commentators have been imprecise about what is meant by political polarization and have relied on measures that are not susceptible to precise testing or are not capable of distinguishing between behavior at the federal and state levels. One particular difficulty is that a number of commentators have focused primarily on trends in ideological polarization, and these trends do not necessarily line up neatly with trends in partisan polarization, with which we are primarily concerned. That is, there are two ways that Americans might be becoming more polarized in their political views. On one hand, Americans might be becoming more polarized in their level of support for conservative versus liberal ideological views. On the other hand, Americans might be becoming more polarized in their level of support for the Republican versus Democratic parties. Although ideological and partisan attachments generally go hand in hand, with the vast majority of conservatives currently aligning with the Republican Party and most liberals aligning with the Democratic Party, this has not always been the case throughout the last four decades. Patterns of support differ especially in the South and Northeast, where conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, respectively, were plentiful until recently. Moreover, even today, ideological and partisan attachments do not necessarily line up in a direct fashion for a number of Americans; the Democratic Party is still home to some number of conservatives and moderates,

and the Republican Party still has some liberals and moderates. Indeed, in their study of state partisanship and ideology, [Erikson, Wright, and McIver \(1993, p. 17\)](#) found “the geography of ideology to be quite different from partisan geography”.

A second difficulty with some of the literature on political polarization is that it relies on survey measures that pose significant challenges for researchers. For instance, [Wright, Erickson, and McIver \(1985\)](#) and [Brace, Sims-Butler, Arceneaux and Johnson \(2002\)](#) have relied primarily on survey data regarding individual self-placement on a conservative/liberal scale. However, there is an inherent subjectivity in surveys that rely on ideological self-identification, which can have vastly different interpretations among individuals in different states and regions.

An additional shortcoming of relying on survey measures is that it is often unclear whether they are capturing citizen preferences regarding national politics, state politics, or some combination of these. In fact, scholars have advanced a number of reasons why one might expect some variance in polarization at the state and national levels, in the direction of increasing polarization at the national level but declining polarization at the state level. For instance, [Dinan and Krane \(2006, p. 349\)](#) have argued that a “heightened level of polarization has particularly distorted national politics. . . . By contrast, state governors and state governments in general continue to operate in the ‘center’”. This is because the issues at stake in national politics and elections differ from state-level issues, and these national-level issues are inherently more polarizing and have become more polarizing in recent decades, in part because of the increasing prominence of national security issues that dominate national politics. In addition, national officials tend to be less pragmatic than state officials in their handling of issues, and may have become more so in recent decades because they receive more donations and are subject to more pressure from national interest groups that are less influential in state politics. ([Dinan & Krane, 2006, pp. 348–349](#)).

A third difficulty with the literature on political polarization is that some scholars have chosen to eschew survey data and rely instead on congressional roll-call voting. Although this is in some ways preferable to survey data, it still poses significant challenges for researchers. [Rabinowitz, Gurian, and MacDonald \(1984\)](#), [Holbrook and Poe \(1987\)](#), and [McCarty et al. \(2006\)](#) are some of the many scholars who have opted to measure citizen ideology indirectly by use of congressional roll-call votes. Congressional voting measures, whether measured by ADA, ACU, or NOMINATE ratings, are only capable of measuring citizen preferences regarding national politics, and therefore still do not allow us to distinguish between potential differences regarding polarization at the state and national levels.

2. An alternative measure of political polarization

In this paper we focus on partisan polarization and employ an objective measure that permits distinctions to be made regarding citizen behavior in state and national politics. In particular, we make use of and extend back in time [Ceaser and Saldin’s \(2005\)](#) recently developed Major Party Index (MPI), which is based on election results for the presidency and the national House and Senate, and the state governorships and state Houses and Senates. Based on these data, we determine whether the 50 state electorates are becoming more or less polarized in their behavior in state elections and in federal elections.

Although there are other indices of party success in elections that might be employed, the MPI is the most comprehensive index and therefore most useful for our purposes. The Ranney Index of interparty competition is a popular measure, but it only examines party success in state legislative and gubernatorial elections (Holbrook & La Raja, 2008, pp. 83–85). Holbrook and Van Dunk (1993), meanwhile, examine competitiveness of state House and Senate races. Still other measures examine party success in congressional elections. However, the MPI is superior in that it includes measures of party success in state legislative and gubernatorial elections, congressional elections, and presidential elections, and therefore is the most comprehensive.

Ceaser and Saldin (2005) compute a state's Overall MPI from several components. Each component of the Overall MPI ranges from 0–100, with higher values representing greater support for the Republican Party. Twenty-five percent of a state's biennial score comes from the percent of the two-party vote that went for the Republican gubernatorial candidate in the last election. Another 25% of the Overall MPI score comes from Republican Party success in state legislative elections: specifically, 12.5% comes from the Republican percent of two-party House members elected in the most recent election; the other 12.5% comes from the Republican percent of two-party Senators elected in the most recent election. Another 25% of the overall MPI score comes from Republican Party success in presidential election voting. This is calculated by taking the Republican percentage of the two-party vote for president in the most recent election. The final 25% of the overall MPI comes from Republican party success in congressional elections: specifically, 12.5% comes from dividing the total number of votes cast for Republican House candidates by the total number of votes cast for two-party House candidates in the most recent election; the other 12.5% comes from dividing the total number of votes cast for Republican Senate candidates by the total number of votes cast for two-party Senate candidates in the two most recent Senate elections in the state.

For instance, the Overall MPI for 2002 is calculated by measuring the Republican percentage of votes cast for president, Congress, and governor in that year's election or the most recent election, as well as the Republican percentage of state House and Senate members chosen in that year or the most recent election. The State MPI for 2002 is calculated by using only the gubernatorial and state legislative data for each state. Similarly, the Federal MPI for 2002 is calculated using only the presidential and congressional election data in each state.

We follow Ceaser and Saldin's (2005) method of calculating the MPI, but with minor modifications. In addition to correcting minor discrepancies in data collection, we excluded Louisiana, because it adopted a nonpartisan primary beginning in the mid-1970s. The problem is that when primaries did not result in a run-off (that is, where a candidate won 50% of the vote in the first round), it is difficult to get an accurate measure of support for the Republican Party, because Republican support was often spread out among multiple candidates on the first ballot.

We should also note several other methodological decisions that we made in collecting data for and calculating the MPI. We obtained presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial data from current and past volumes of the America Votes series, and we obtained state legislative data from the Book of the States volumes. In collecting these data, we faced the question of how to handle Nebraska (which had a nonpartisan unicameral legislature throughout this period) and Minnesota (which had nonpartisan legislative elections through 1972). In each case we permitted the gubernatorial score to count for the entire State MPI. We were also faced with the problem of unreported vote totals in some districts where there was an uncontested

congressional election. When this occurred, we decided to use only the vote totals for the remaining districts.

Ceaser and Saldin (2005) calculated MPI scores from 1990 to 2002 and collected data for 2004. We recalculated the MPI scores for these years, based on these modest modifications. We also collected data and calculated MPI scores from 1970 to 1988, in order to assemble Overall, Federal, and State MPI scores for each biennial period from 1970 to 2004. Political scientists have designated the post-1968 era as the Sixth Party System (Bibby & Schaffner, 2008, pp. 32–35), and we follow this classification by choosing 1970 as our starting point and continuing through 2004, which is the most recent date for which MPI data has been collected.

3. Results

An increase in partisan polarization would be reflected by a divergence in the behavior of state electorates; that is, states would be becoming more dissimilar over time, as indicated by an increase in the standard deviation of MPI scores across the 50 states. Conversely, a decline in partisan polarization would be reflected by a convergence in the behavior of state electorates; that is, states would be becoming more similar over time, as indicated by a decline in the standard deviation of MPI scores across the 50 states. There is sound precedent for proceeding in this fashion. For instance, McCarty et al. (2006) examined the standard deviation of congressional NOMINATE scores across the states in each year to show that states were diverging in their ideology. Given our concern with measuring trends in partisan polarization, we follow the same procedure using MPI scores.¹ An increasing standard deviation signifies divergence, whereas a declining standard deviation signifies convergence. Complete convergence occurs when each state has the same MPI score, regardless of its value. It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that convergence does not imply elections are a toss-up in every state. Rather, convergence simply implies states are moving toward a similar MPI score.²

We first turn our attention to partisan behavior as represented by the Overall MPI. The averages, standard deviations, and ranges for each biennial period are presented in Table 1. Our principal concern is with the degree of partisan convergence/divergence as measured by changes in the standard deviation over time, plotted in Fig. 1. By this measure we do not find statistically significant evidence of either convergence or divergence. Although the standard deviation appeared to be greatest in the 1970s, the differences between then and the 1990s are quite small. Indeed, regressing the standard deviation against a constant and linear time trend (t -statistic = -0.85 , p -value = 0.41) revealed the pattern is not consistent with a significant decline in the standard deviation over time. Even the slight increase shown beginning in 1992 would not be considered significant.³ Therefore, despite the changes in the average level of partisanship for the country shown in the first column of Table 1, our results indicate that the degree of divergence among the 50 states has remained relatively steady since 1970. Thus, we reach a different conclusion regarding trends in polarization when focusing on partisanship than McCarty et al. (2006) found for ideology.

In terms of measuring partisanship, a benefit to the Overall MPI is its comprehensiveness, but a downside is that this can obscure important distinctions in partisan preferences in state and federal elections. Patterns of partisanship can differ at the state and federal levels, either

Table 1
Overall MPI scores across states.

Year	Average	S.D.	Min	Max
1970	47.39	9.39	18.42 (AL)	63.94 (VT)
1972	49.97	7.65	27.64 (AL)	62.88 (ND)
1974	46.37	7.74	29.02 (AL)	63.26 (FL)
1976	42.45	9.32	20.21 (AR)	56.09 (SD)
1978	45.06	9.61	21.07 (GA)	61.43 (VT)
1980	48.67	9.74	22.62 (AL)	65.44 (UT)
1982	47.27	9.13	28.13 (HI)	68.05 (UT)
1984	49.37	7.82	32.26 (HI)	66.33 (UT)
1986	50.34	8.15	30.08 (MD)	67.74 (UT)
1988	48.01	7.74	30.38 (MD)	63.16 (NH)
1990	47.65	6.65	31.04 (HI)	61.76 (NH)
1992	45.67	7.10	28.99 (HI)	59.38 (UT)
1994	50.09	7.98	28.79 (HI)	65.87 (KS)
1996	49.83	7.88	32.38 (HI)	67.69 (UT)
1998	50.23	8.69	31.63 (HI)	69.09 (KS)
2000	51.48	8.73	31.44 (MA)	71.37 (KS)
2002	52.08	8.82	31.50 (MA)	71.57 (NE)
2004	51.95	8.77	28.56 (MA)	70.56 (ID)

because the main issues in state elections differ from the key issues in federal elections, or are addressed in a more pragmatic fashion at the state than at the federal level (Dinan & Krane, 2006) or because voters in certain states regularly prefer to send members of one party to federal offices and members of the other party to state offices (Ceaser & Saldin, 2005). In order to test the possibility of a difference in partisan convergence/divergence at the state and federal level, we calculated the averages, standard deviations, and ranges for each biennial period separately for federal elections (the Federal MPI) and state elections (the State MPI).

As shown in Table 2 and Fig. 2, the standard deviations of the Federal MPIs and State MPIs move in opposite directions. State electorates are diverging in their behavior in federal elections, suggesting that state electorates are becoming more dissimilar in their behavior. In federal elections, however, the standard deviation is shrinking over time, suggesting that state electorates are becoming more similar in their behavior. Regression analysis determines that

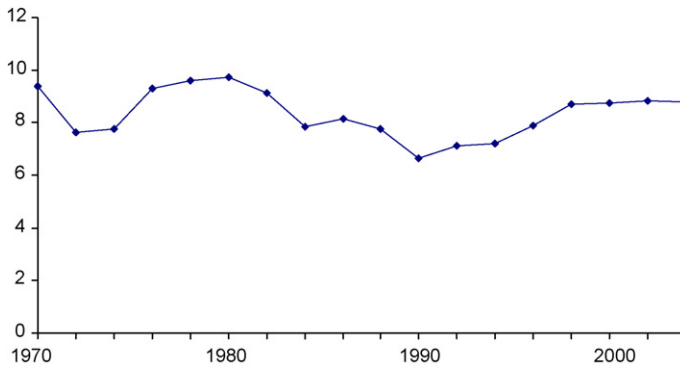


Fig. 1. Standard deviation of overall MPI scores.

Table 2
Disaggregated MPI scores across states.

Year	Federal MPI				State MPI			
	Average	S.D.	Min	Max	Average	S.D.	Min	Max
1970	50.47	8.25	24.97 (MS)	69.85 (IL)	44.32	13.02	0.47 (AL)	63.89 (WY)
1972	56.15	5.79	41.96 (MA)	68.75 (KS)	43.79	13.65	0.47 (AL)	63.59 (WY)
1974	54.25	6.02	36.30 (HI)	68.92 (FL)	38.49	12.48	1.58 (MS)	57.60 (VA)
1976	46.95	7.43	30.09 (AR)	63.64 (AK)	37.96	12.37	8.02 (AL)	58.54 (VA)
1978	47.91	7.24	27.32 (GA)	60.46 (VT)	42.21	12.78	14.10 (AL)	62.60 (SD)
1980	52.94	7.91	31.15 (AL)	70.27 (UT)	44.39	12.99	14.10 (AL)	65.05 (ND)
1982	52.34	8.03	29.03 (HI)	73.78 (UT)	42.20	11.99	21.94 (MS)	73.29 (SD)
1984	55.27	7.03	36.21 (HI)	71.50 (WY)	43.47	10.43	23.83 (AR)	69.72 (SD)
1986	55.07	7.10	39.58 (GA)	70.86 (KS)	45.61	11.36	15.02 (MD)	68.19 (UT)
1988	51.70	6.12	36.19 (HI)	65.38 (UT)	44.32	11.09	15.38 (MD)	67.07 (IL)
1990	50.93	5.37	37.38 (HI)	62.57 (UT)	44.37	9.66	18.17 (RI)	62.39 (NH)
1992	47.56	6.35	34.26 (HI)	60.70 (UT)	43.77	9.60	22.17 (RI)	59.05 (KS)
1994	50.09	7.90	33.11 (AR)	66.42 (MS)	50.08	10.42	23.64 (HI)	73.33 (NH)
1996	48.89	7.61	30.67 (WV)	63.98 (AK)	50.77	10.69	25.94 (NE)	73.38 (UT)
1998	49.43	8.69	29.95 (WV)	67.21 (AK)	51.02	11.09	31.30 (MD)	77.84 (ID)
2000	52.03	9.46	29.58 (MA)	75.13 (AK)	50.93	10.63	30.77 (MD)	79.56 (ID)
2002	52.72	10.12	29.33 (MA)	75.23 (AK)	51.45	9.30	33.67 (MA)	71.50 (NE)
2004	53.03	9.74	25.03 (MA)	72.77 (ID)	50.87	9.55	32.09 (MA)	70.96 (ND)

both of these trends are statistically significant.⁴ Initially, differences among the states were much greater for state elections but have been steadily declining, whereas for federal elections differences among the states have been increasing, especially starting with the 1992 elections.

Breaking down the Overall MPI into its separate components for federal and state elections, therefore, reveals important differences. The Federal MPI suggests states are diverging over time in their partisan voting behavior. On the other hand, analyzing the State MPI suggests that state electorates are converging in their partisan voting behavior. Our conclusion regarding whether states are becoming more or less polarized therefore depends on the use of federal or state election data. Divergence is found in federal elections, similar to McCarty et al.’s (2006)

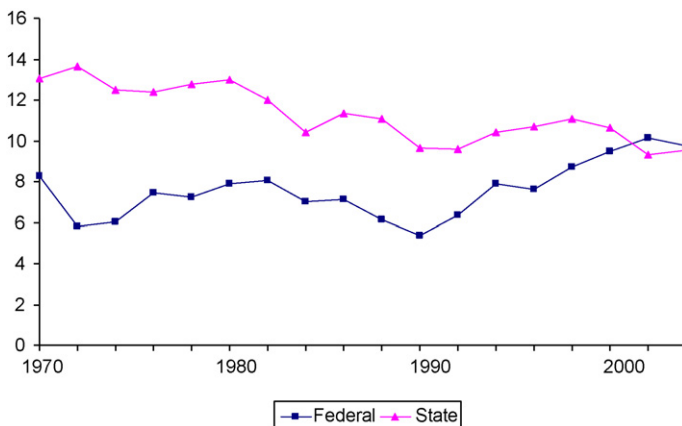


Fig. 2. Standard deviation of federal MPI and standard deviation of State MPI scores.

use of NOMINATE scores which are limited to federal legislation. These findings thereby raise the possibility that conclusions regarding ideological polarization could also potentially differ if consistent proxies for ideological views across states could be developed for state legislation.

Scholars have long appreciated the phenomenon whereby citizens in the same state can have a split personality when it comes to their behavior in state and national elections (Brown & Bruce, 2002). This has been true especially in the South, where a number of states in the post-1968 era leaned Democratic in gubernatorial and state legislative elections but favored Republicans in presidential and congressional contests. It has also been true to some extent in certain northern and Midwestern states that leaned Republican in state elections but Democratic in national races. Moreover, this in-state variation in support for Republican and Democratic parties at the state and national levels – and thus the extent of this split-personality phenomenon – has also been shown to be decreasing in recent decades (Brown & Bruce, 2008). What has not been previously studied, and what is revealed by this analysis, is that when considered in their totality, the 50 states are becoming more dissimilar over time in their behavior in national elections but more similar in their behavior in state-level elections.

4. Conclusion

To return to the questions posed at the beginning, the overall data are mixed regarding whether the 50 state electorates are becoming more or less polarized since 1970. If we consider overall partisanship, as measured by MPI assessments of voter support for one party over the other in state and federal elections, we find neither convergence nor divergence. Although overall partisanship ratings in the 50 states appear to have been diverging since the early-1990s, the degree of partisan divergence was not statistically significant. In other words, differences among the states have not significantly changed.

However, patterns of polarization among the 50 states differ at the federal versus the state level, as found by deconstructing the Overall MPI into its separate components of a Federal MPI (comprising relative voter support for the two major parties in presidential and congressional elections) and a State MPI (comprising relative voter support for the two parties in gubernatorial and state legislative elections). Although the Overall MPI was not shown to be converging or diverging in a statistically significant fashion, this masks significant trends in the two main components of the Overall MPI. Voter support for the two major parties in federal elections has been diverging in a statistically significant fashion, especially since the early 1990s, similar to McCarty et al.'s (2006) findings for ideological divergence, which was measured strictly at the federal level. However, we find the opposite result for state elections; voter support for the two major parties in state elections has been continually converging since 1970, and in a statistically significant fashion.

These findings are important because they suggest a need for scholars and political analysts to be more precise about claims of polarization in political behavior. Just as Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope cautioned scholars and journalists to distinguish between polarization of elites and ordinary citizens (see, however, Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005), our findings suggest the need to distinguish between trends in polarization for national versus state politics. When it comes to their behavior in federal elections, the 50 states are indeed becoming more polarized.

However, in their behavior in state elections, the states are actually becoming less polarized. This appears to confirm some scholars' observations that state politics differ in important respects from national politics, whether regarding the key issues or the level of pragmatism of elected officials, and in ways that mitigate and possibly counteract the polarizing forces that have increasingly pervaded politics at the national level.

Our contribution, therefore, has been to identify contrasting trends in national versus state political polarization and thereby demonstrate the need for scholars and commentators to be more precise when claiming that states are becoming more polarized, such that red states are becoming redder and blue states becoming bluer. Insofar as these claims are understood as applying only to federal elections, they are accurate. However, to the extent that these claims might be understood as signaling that these trends also apply to state elections, this is not supported by the evidence; our evidence demonstrates that states are converging – not diverging – in their political behavior regarding state elections.

Notes

1. The coefficient of variation (CV), which divides the standard deviation by its mean value, could also be used. The time series patterns of the CV largely mirror those of the standard deviation itself.
2. To reemphasize, states need not be converging at 50. In addition, because a state's score is an average of various election results within the state, it does not tell us anything about the specific distribution of partisan rankings within the state. Likewise, McCarty et al.'s (2006) results do not indicate if the degree of ideological differences among Congressional representatives within a given state is becoming more or less divergent.
3. This was tested by introducing separate interaction terms between a linear time trend and dummies for years before or after 1991. The two interaction variables allow for separate time trends in each subperiod. Neither interaction term was statistically significant.
4. Again, this was found by regressing the standard deviation against a constant and linear time trend. For the Federal MPI, the *t*-statistic on the time trend variable is 2.37 with *p*-value of 0.03. For the State MPI, the time trend variable has a *t*-statistic of –6.82, with *p*-value <0.01.

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