United States Centre public discussion
Why Washington Won’t Work

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Why Washington Won’t Work

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and

Thomas J. Rudolph
Trump Rally Canceled Amid Chaos
Why Washington Won’t Work

• Tom Rudolph & I attempt to make sense of the polarization debate while connecting it to why nothing gets done in Washington.

• **The Puzzle:** If Americans are not *ideologically* extreme, which we think is true, then why do we put up with immoderation from our representatives?

• We suggest polarization does exist, but scholars have been looking for it in the wrong places.
On Polarization

• Those studying polarization have adopted a literal understanding for evidence. Many people must cluster at the poles.

• Their focus has been mostly on ideology and issue preferences.

• Do either of these decisions make sense, given what we know about public opinion?
We see polarization like this among elites...

Source: DW-NOMINATE scores, 112th Congress from voteview.com.
...but not in the mass public.
Few who study public opinion would be surprised

- People who do not know much about politics—which is a *lot* of Americans—choose the middle.

- Furthermore, is there anything beyond politics that *all* Americans would express strong preferences for or against?
  - Baseball?
  - Food?

- Not even people who are extreme want to call themselves extreme. Being “extreme” is not fashionable in the US.
Is polarization in Washington exclusively ideological?

- When conservative/liberal ideas become liberal/conservative ones, do Republicans/Democrats continue to support them?
  - Individual mandate on health insurance
  - Cap & trade
  - Education reform based on federal standards
  - Rx drug benefits under Medicare
Polarization in Washington is partisan, too

- Narrow majorities in Congress eliminate parties’ incentives to cooperate on much of anything.
- When the minority feels it can win the majority in the next election, providing the majority with any legislative victories is not in the minority’s best interest.
- How should that raw partisanship manifest in the public?
Polarization elsewhere? Feelings

Feelings About Republican Party, 1980

Feelings About Democratic Party, 1980

Feelings About Republican Party, 2012

Feelings About Democratic Party, 2012

Source: ANES Cumulative File
Partisans’ Feelings About Their Own & the Other Party

Source: ANES Cumulative File and YouGov 2011
Polarization elsewhere, II? Political trust

Source: ANES Cumulative File; CCES 2010
“Never” is an extreme word

“How much do you trust the government in Washington to do what’s right?”

Source: CCES 2010
What caused trust polarization?

- We demonstrate that the **polarization of feelings about the parties** is the key cause.
  - People do not generally trust things that they do not like.

- **Partisan Reasoning and Partisan Weighting** are our companion explanations.
  - People of different partisan stripes see the world the way they want to see it, not how it is.
  - In addition, people update politically relevant evaluations based on criteria that are most advantageous.
Partisan Assessment of the Economy, 2012

Source: ANES 2012
Partisan Assessment of the Economy, 1988

Source: ANES 1988
Partisan Assessment of America’s Strength in the World, 2012

Δ = ~50%

Source: ANES 2012
Partisan Assessment of America’s Strength in the World, 1988

\[ \Delta = \sim 20\% \]

Weaker

Same

Stronger

Source: ANES 1988
Why is polarized trust important?

• *Polarized* trust contributes to the governing crisis.
  • Trusters from the out-party are those most inclined to make sacrifices to support governing-party initiatives.
  • No trust among out-party identifiers means few will make such sacrifices.
  • These partisans are especially important because they are central to the reelection constituencies of minority party members of Congress.
Minority Party Leaders Have Different Incentives Now

• Without consensus, the public puts little pressure on officeholders to compromise.

Mitch McConnell

Hugh Scott
Politics of economic stimulus

• Gaining public support for economic policy solutions suggests a Gordian Knot of relationships.

• Poor economy = low trust, but people need trust to support a government intervention in the economy.
  • Except to support tax cuts:
  • A bias in public opinion that supports conservative aims and undermines liberal aims.

• Worse, Republicans completely lack trust.
  • Low support for spending from GOP identifiers $\rightarrow$ Consensus fails to develop in mass public $\rightarrow$ Members feel little pressure to compromise
Support for Types of Economic Stimulus by Political Trust, 2012

- Deficit Spending:
  - Distrusters: 34%
  - Trusters: 55%

- Tax Cuts:
  - Distrusters: 68%
  - Trusters: 65%

- Spending Increases:
  - Distrusters: 20%
  - Trusters: 70%

Source: CCAP 2012
Effect of Political Trust on Support for Deficit Spending

Source: CCAP 2012
Effect of Political Trust on Support for Increased Spending as Stimulus

Source: CCAP 2012
The Challenge to Governance of Elite Polarization

- Polarization by party/ideology in Congress is as wide now as any time in the last 100+ years.

- Traditionally, the public has been able to nudge legislators to overcome their worst instincts, when consensus about an issue emerges in the public.

- However, with low and polarized trust in government, consensus in the public does not develop, making public opinion an increasingly inert force.
THANKS!
### Effect of Trust on Support for Deficit & Increased Government Spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Support for Deficit Spending</th>
<th>Support for Increased Government Spending</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Government</td>
<td>1.368*** (0.296)</td>
<td>2.003*** (0.352)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1.291*** (0.229)</td>
<td>1.013*** (0.262)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>-1.481*** (0.239)</td>
<td>-2.485*** (0.347)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in Government *</td>
<td>-1.118* (0.501)</td>
<td>-1.404* (0.579)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in Government *</td>
<td>0.745 (0.528)</td>
<td>3.083*** (0.717)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
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<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>2942</td>
<td>2919</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>0.290</td>
<td>0.406</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses.

*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, two tailed.

Source: 2012 CCAP
Test case: Climate Change

• A consensus among experts ought to cause consensus to develop in the public.

• However, public opinion has been polarizing since 2007.

• Can we do anything to bridge the divide?
Maybe the US Military can help

• Effective cue givers need two characteristics (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). The US Military has both.

  • 1) Trustworthiness Americans trust it more than any institution, public or private (GSS 2012). 55 percent said they had “a great deal of confidence” in it.

    • In comparison, Supreme Court (30 percent), executive branch (15 percent), Congress (7 percent).

  • 2) Knowledge, although people do not know it

    • Production of electric vehicles in Army
    • “Great Green Fleet” for Navy
    • Navy and Air Force at the forefront of developing alternative fuels for aircraft.
What if we tell the public about the military’s interest in mitigating climate change?

A survey experiment

- Step 1: Manipulate whether people are told that 1) the military or 2) the federal government has expertise with mitigating climate change.

- Step 2: Manipulate whether people are told that 1) the military or 2) the EPA will implement a spending program designed to help mitigate climate change.
Support for Environmental Spending, by Condition

![Bar chart showing support for environmental spending by implementing agency. The chart compares support levels for the Military and EPA, with 'Military Knowledgeable' and 'Fed Gov Knowledgeable' categories. The x-axis represents the implementing agency (Military and EPA), while the y-axis shows the percentage of support for environmental spending.]
Shrinking Partisan Polarization

![Bar chart showing shrinking partisan polarization between different government and military agencies, with categories Gov-EPA, Gov-Mil, Mil-EPA, and Mil-Mil, and comparing Republican and Democrat perspectives.]
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