Original Article

International polarity and America's polarization

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Abstract There is a growing consensus that the United States is undergoing a period of political polarization, particularly among elites. The causes of this polarization remain under-researched. We argue that shifts in the international distribution of power influence America's polarization. To demonstrate the argument, this article analyzes changes in power and polarization quantitatively and qualitatively from 1945 to 2005. A key finding is that greater relative power on the world stage substantially increases polarization and some of its correlates, like income inequality. The argument also measures the extent of international influence on domestic polarization and makes novel predictions on when and why polarization will fall.
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Introduction

While there remains some dispute over who is polarized and by how much, there is mounting evidence of American political polarization between parties, especially at the elite level (Fiorina *et al*, 2006; Galston and Nivola, 2006, p. 10; Jacobson, 2006, pp. 86–87, 92; McCarty *et al*, 2006, pp. 24–25; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009, p. 18). The international implications of US polarization may be substantial. According to many, polarized parties are a recipe for erratic, incoherent and unsustainable foreign policies (Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007, p. 10; Brownstein, 2007, p. 237; Beinart, 2008, pp. 156–167; cf. Busby and Monten, 2008; Chaudoin

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et al, 2010). This article examines the origins and trajectory of polarization in the United States.

Some of the leading explanations for this polarization include the realignment of the South, ideological sorting, income inequality and the increasing importance of 'values' politics. Oddly, all these factors undergo the most precipitous change at a coincidental time. Why was there a massive leap in the percentage of Southern conservatives who identified themselves as Republicans in 1992 (Jacobson 2007, p. 28)? Why does the percentage of Americans self-identifying as ideologically liberal or conservative shoot up around 1992 (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2005; McCarty *et al*, 2006, p. 72)? Why does the percentage of self-described moderates not fall below 45 per cent before 1992, and after 1992 never reach 45 per cent (Campbell, 2006, p. 159)?

Why does income inequality increase sharply in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Piketty and Saez, 2003, Table II)? Why did Democratic presidential candidates fare about 2 per cent worse than Republican presidential candidates among regular churchgoers before 1992, but afterward fared an average of nearly 12 per cent worse (Galston and Nivola, 2006, p. 22; McCarty *et al*, 2006, p. 99)? Why does real spending on House and Senate campaigns and polarization among legislators precipitously escalate after 1992 (Abramowitz *et al*, 2006, p. 89; McCarty *et al*, 2006, p. 141; Jacobson, 2007, p. 24)? More broadly, the empirical puzzles of this work are why is America polarizing and why did this process begin in the mid-1960s and accelerate in the early 1990s?

We argue that one of the most outstanding features of international politics is causally connected to one of the most outstanding features of American politics. America's primacy is a permissive condition for its current polarization. US polarization has varied with its relative power; the more Americans have had to rely on their own efforts to confront peer competitors, the less political elites have polarized.

While many factors contribute to polarization and receive the lion's share of attention, no prior work has placed primary causal emphasis on geopolitics or attempted to measure its influence. We try to fill this lacuna and find that a spare argument explains a significant amount of polarization and yields unique predictions. A secondary argument is that relative power influences not only polarization but some of its correlates, such as income inequality, as well.

To make our case, we first elaborate our argument and then examine alternate hypotheses. The third section discusses how the argument will be tested quantitatively and qualitatively from 1945 to 2005, and the fourth tests the argument. In the fifth section, we offer predictions on when polarization will decline. The last section sums the findings of the work and their implications.

Politics Past the Water's Edge

Simply put, we argue that America's relative power allows for much of its domestic polarization. Power is a primary determinant of the distance between parties. When relative power falls, internal disagreement narrows; when relative power rises, internal disagreement widens. Under various guises, this argument has a long and distinguished pedigree (Polybius, 1922, p. 299; Spykman, 1925, p. 125; Coser, 1956, p. 95; Weber, 1958, pp. 254, 261; Simmel, 1964, pp. 88, 92–98; Montesquieu, 1965, pp. 95, 169; Hintze, 1975, p. 215; Waltz, 1979, pp. 117–123; Augustine, 1984, p. 42; Hume, 1987, p. 276; Walt, 1987, pp. 32–33; Kant, 1991, p. 48; Plutarch, 1992, p. 479; Gibbon, 1993, p. 4; pp. 117–127; Thucydides, 1998, pp. 47, 130, 136, 262, 345; Coby, 1999, pp. 102–103; Xenophon, 2008, p. 182).

More specifically, our argument extends the logic of neorealism, or structural realism, to American politics. Neorealism contends that states maximize their autonomy by balancing against other states, and balancing behavior can be of two kinds: internal or external. Internal balancing is relying on one's own capability; external balancing is relying on the capabilities of aligned states (Waltz, 1979, pp. 118, 168). For reasons explained below, we hypothesize that the more states have to balance internally, the less polarization they will exhibit. Stated differently, the more states need to balance internally, the more states will behave like unitary actors.

It is helpful to overview the argument initially by thinking about the differences across systems: multipolar, bipolar or unipolar (Waltz, 1979, pp. 129–131). In a multipolar world of many great powers, there are bright prospects for both sorts of balancing: internal and external. In a bipolar world of two great powers, internal balancing becomes more important for the two poles. In a unipolar world of a sole superpower, there is little incentive for the sole superpower to expend much effort engaging in either behavior. All three forms of polarity have their perils, but, for the sole superpower, none is less threatening than unipolarity. Even within a given system, increases in relative power tend to increase security, at least in the near term. Later, we test the domestic effects of changes in the distribution of power both across and within systems.

High levels of national security have broad implications for domestic politics. Politics is about who gets what, when and how, and this implies two elemental tasks: coordination and distribution. First, groups must coordinate to produce collective goods and then they must divide up the accrued benefits. These activities are in tension; there are incentives to cooperate to expand the size of the pie, but they do not completely harmonize with incentives to compete for a larger slice of the same pie.

Coordination and distribution problems are particularly noteworthy with respect to security, the foundational collective good for every state. Preparing

for and fighting wars are enormously expensive functions of states, and states need to mobilize their populations and command wealth to provide for the common defense (Andreski, 1968, pp. 131–32, 173; Mann, 1986, p. 433; 1988, pp. xi, 108–110; Tilly, 1993). But the necessities of defense are not constant across time, and domestic groups are not equally eager to conform, contribute and compromise for the common good. When there is less need to coordinate for defense, there is greater temptation to vie for the spoils that states produce.

Political elites are the main actors in this explanation, their context is domestic political institutions, and their goal is political power. Why focus on elites? Mainly because they are the most sensitive indicators of changing structural conditions. They have the best access to information and the levers of power; they lead groups to more promising positions on the political landscape or they are cashiered and replaced by leaders who will (Laitin, 1998, pp. 20–29; Machiavelli, 1998, p. 100; Posner, 2005, pp. 2–12).

Two mechanisms cause position changes – elections and socialization – though both take time. The democratic process is typically slow, segmented and deliberative; there is a time lag between environmental stimulus and political response. Yet over time, less successful elites are socialized to imitate more successful elites, and if they fail to adapt, elections will replace them. In the American context, this means elites compete for power in a bicameral system of first past the post, two-party democracy. Elites lead groups that cluster around the two parties and jockey for domestic power, which they measure directly by votes and less directly by campaign contributions.

We contend that when states face powerful rivals, pressure falls on elites from the top down to dampen discord, mobilize masses and extract wealth.[1] Therefore, as power decreases, the necessity to coordinate grows and the incentives to press distributional concerns lessen. Insecurity compresses the parameters of debate within states; though debate may remain keen, the distance between parties will diminish. Conversely, as power increases, the need to coordinate declines and incentives to press distributional concerns rise. Security permits fuller airing of internal grievances.

One corollary of this argument is that what may appear to be coincidental expansions or contractions of independent cleavages may in fact originate from the same source, international security. Of course, these cleavages may be over material resources, like wealth, as well as non-material resources, like rights and privileges. For example, domestic inequality illustrates the pervasive effects of international competition. States preparing for total wars with peer competitors need cooperation, not just indifferent acceptance, from citizens of all walks of life. For when 'those with little or no property are reluctant to fight fiercely … the property rights of the rich are of little worth' (cf. Porter, 1994, p. 10; Holmes and Sunstein, 1999, p. 197). States vying with lesser opponents or readying for lesser wars, though, need not be so sharing, inclusive

and disciplined, creating greater space for extreme positions. In such circumstances, those who aggressively advance the economic interests of the rich, who have much to gain and, being fewer, struggle less with collective action problems, will be generously rewarded.

Another corollary is that domestic political institutions will adapt to the international environment. As power increases polarization and cleavages will increase proportionately, and the reverse is true for decreases in power. At critical intervals along this spectrum, significant institutional change is likely in response to prevailing conditions, locking in greater disintegration or integration. At extreme ends of this spectrum, old states could fragment and new states form. Although space constraints preclude pursuing the second corollary empirically, it is an additional testable implication of our argument.

Finally, we mention a few caveats and limitations of the argument. This type of argument is known as the 'second image reversed' and may take two forms: one emphasizing economic hard times and the other stressing political-military rivalries.[2] We espouse the latter position, not because the former is false but for purposes of parsimony.

We bound the scope of the work to explain only American polarization over the last 60 years. Although cross-national tests over longer periods of time would be preferable, because of space and data constraints (on which more later) the present effort aims only to erect a modest edifice, onto which later additions may be built. Our argument is not intended to be a general theory of domestic polarization, though the logic may at some point provide the basis for one. Even if the argument holds in some circumstances but not others, it would still advance the literature.

Next, neorealism is austere and excels at painting with a broad brush, but it makes no claim to explain details well. Please note that simply because international relations are a heavy influence on polarization does not mean that internal divisions over, say, foreign policy will be the first or most to expand (cf. Aldrich *et al*, 1989; Enloe, 1989, p. 56; Trubowitz and Mellow, 2005, p. 448; Page and Bouton, 2006; Snyder *et al*, 2009; Chaudoin *et al*, 2010). In fact, there is little in our argument that predicts which domestic cleavages will be most salient – religious, fiscal or foreign policy issues, for example, may all qualify. The argument only predicts that whatever the salient cleavages are, an increase in security will tend to widen them in general.

Further, neorealism is not deterministic. It does not say that agents are rational and always obey systemic imperatives, nor does it claim that successful politicians are card-carrying realists, nor does it explain specific policy outcomes. What it does assert is that agents tend to be sensitive to costs, and that if agents act contrary to structural necessities or fail to react to shifts in power they are often punished. Punishment promotes central tendencies that generate the theory's explanatory ability (Waltz, 1979, pp. 70–71, 118).

Certainly there are numerous factors that have an independent effect on polarization, but the international distribution of power is a powerful force amplifying and muting those factors and the emotions and loyalties that correspond to them (Skocpol, 1979, pp. 29–31; Sumner, 2002, p. 13).

Relatedly, our argument unabashedly pushes realism beyond its recent incarnation back to an earlier one. Neorealism's founder, Kenneth Waltz, famously sought to shut domestic politics out of his theory. States are black boxes that he prefers to leave unopened, and he holds the view that his theory of international politics cannot generate a theory of foreign policy. Today, nearly no neorealist excludes domestic factors from his or her explanation and the cutting-edge scholarship explicitly delves into the nexus between domestic politics and international politics (for example, Lobell *et al*, 2009). Indeed, this is a return to realism's origins. Authors like Thucydides (1998, pp. 130–136, 262) and Otto Hintze (1975, p. 183) laid primary stress on the international distribution of power as a cause of conflict between states and as a cause of conflict within states. Despite our debt to Waltz's theory, our argument is more in line with realist reasoning over the centuries.

In addition, this is a balance of power argument, not a balance of threat argument (Walt, 1987, pp. 5–6, 22–26; Christensen, 1996, pp. 25–28). Although the two approaches are complementary, again, our claims are spare. One could augment our relatively objective variables with subjective variables – relating to threat perception, culture and more – to improve on the explanatory reach of the model (for example, balance of threat theory would be superior in explaining the brief, depolarized response to 9/11). We agree that different kinds of threats spur different kinds of responses, but that path is not explored here because we aim only to build a theoretical foundation, and including balance of threat theory would be less parsimonious, harder to falsify and require prolixity to establish competently.

To summarize, the principal hypothesis of this article is that as a superpower's relative power increases polarization will increase. More international power means wider domestic divisions. Of course, shifts in relative power are shot through the prism of domestic political institutions; states do not instantaneously react to their environment, their internal organization shapes their responses (Wohlforth, 2011, pp. 447–450, 455). But fundamentally, world politics conditions the incentives for domestic dissent.

Existing Explanations for Polarization

There is much debate over the causes of America's polarization, and many rival views to the argument advanced here. We do not claim alternative explanations are wrong; overall our position supplements those presented below. However,

we wish to develop a neglected explanation centered on international politics, and this section helps situate our contribution more clearly. After addressing claims that resemble our own, we delve into alternative explanations centered on economics, domestic politics and personalities.

Let us begin with claims kin to our own. Other scholars touch on similar logic in their work, the most exemplary of which is Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz's article on the demise of bipartisan support for liberal internationalism (that is, a strong commitment to multilateralism and the use of force) in American foreign policy (cf. Gourevitch, 2002, pp. 313, 327; Nivola, 2003, pp. 495–496, 512–517; Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007). They contend that a confluence of geopolitical and domestic factors led to the rise of bipartisanship after the Second World War, and a confluence of geopolitical and domestic factors – some related to their predecessors, some not – led to the triumph of partisanship over bipartisanship. Kupchan and Trubowitz account for this decline of bipartisanship with a wide array of factors: polarizing issues, polarizing personalities, unipolarity, legacies of economic downturns, generational change, gerrymandering, income inequality, and regional divides over ideology and economics. In the final analysis (2007, pp. 31, 40–42), they are deeply skeptical about bipartisanship rebounding for almost exclusively domestic political reasons, and counsel the United States to trim its grand strategic ambitions accordingly.

We support the portion of Kupchan and Trubowitz's argument that speaks to unipolarity, but we find their incarnation of the claim theoretically underdeveloped, inadequately tested, overshadowed by domestic factors, and flanked by a motley mix of explanations whose interrelationships and relative importance are opaque. Our stark disagreements about causal priority have been made plain elsewhere (Parent *et al*, 2008), and need not be belabored. Here, we aim to add value by contributing a parsimonious, falsifiable, rigorous explanation with novel causal emphasis and policy implications.

Economic explanations

Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal put forward the most compelling alternative argument. They contend that, primarily, income inequality is to blame for polarization, though inequality is also linked to immigration (McCarty *et al*, 1997, p. 1; 2006, pp. 6–9, 12; Hall and Lindholm, 1999, p. 17; cf. Bartels, 2006; 2008, pp. 3, 86; Krugman, 2007, pp. 7, 11, 163, 185; Bishop, 2008, p. 12). Their narrative is that nonpolitical forces, like changes in technology, lifestyle and compensation practices, have fueled inequality. This increased inequality takes on a political dimension because it raises the incentives for the better off to oppose income redistribution.

Republicans who tack to the right gain the support of the better paid; as the majority party, the Republicans are strong enough to reduce redistribution, and as the minority party Republicans can block redistributive measures (McCarty *et al*, 2006, pp. 2–3). The consequence is a dance between Republicans and Democrats chiefly over income distribution.

We agree that inequality and immigration are tied to polarization, but we do not find the inequality thesis entirely convincing. Our main concern is that McCarty *et al* overlook that domestic concentrations of income may be related to international concentrations of power. When security is scarce, borders tend to be less porous. In periods of primacy, economies are likely to be stable and prosperous, and the rich and poor have less incentive to get along. Also their work does not explain why polarization accelerates when it does where it does. The most likely technological innovation, the Internet, caught on after income inequality bounded upwards in the late 1980s, and lifestyle changes appear to be an *ad hoc* explanation.

In addition, the United States is not the only country with a highly developed economy, post-industrial values and handsomely paid executives. The same globalizing forces of technology, lifestyle and executive compensation that act on the United States act on other countries as well. Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez (2003, p. 35) speculate that herd behavior in executive compensation may be responsible. Then why is America in a league of its own when it comes to inequality? Perhaps some of this difference is due to idiosyncratic American traits, like a culture that prizes rugged individualism. Yet the United States has long extolled rugged individualism, why has inequality widened faster in America than in comparable states only recently (see Figure 1)? Or perhaps the real reasons for growing economic inequality are political forces, like the concerted actions of conservative organizations (Krugman, 2007; Hacker and Pierson, 2010; Packer, 2011, p. 30). Yet this smacks of a 'just-so' story; greed is something of a constant and there is no good explanation for why conservative campaigns became much more successful when they did for as long as they did.

For decades, American inequality (represented by the income share of the top 0.1 per cent) stayed roughly even with the United Kingdom and Canada, that is, until the end of the Cold War when the United States vaulted over them. The reason American inequality and polarization do not look like that of other developed democracies may be, among other things, because the United States is more powerful than other states.

Domestic political explanations

Another explanation is that polarization is a product of the realignment of the South (cf. Trubowitz, 1998; Cannon, 2006, p. 166; Galston and Nivola, 2006,

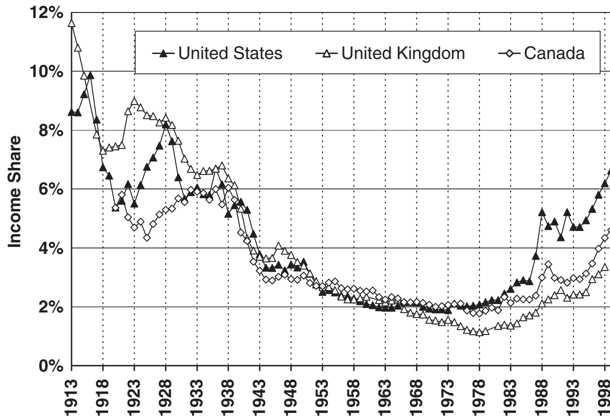

Figure 1: Top 0.1 per cent income shares in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, 1913–2000.
Source: Piketty and Saez (2006).

pp. 19–22; McCarty *et al*, 2006, p. 11; Theriault, 2008, pp. 55, 84, 129). Gary Jacobson (2007, pp. 26–27) sums the argument: 'The civil rights revolution, and particularly the Voting Rights Act of 1965, brought Southern blacks into the electorate as Democrats, while moving conservative whites to abandon their ancestral allegiance to the Democratic party in favor of the ideologically and racially more compatible Republicans. In-migration also contributed…'. If this reasoning is correct, we should see Southern conservatives shift toward the Republican Party in large numbers well before 1992. But the data do not reflect such a dynamic (see Figure 2).

Before 1990, the percentage of white Southern conservatives who identified themselves as Republicans peaked in 1984 shy of 60 per cent. By 1990, the percentage of white Southern conservatives who so identified had fallen to approximately 45 per cent, about the average for the period after 1972. In 1992, however, the percentage suddenly skyrocketed to a historic record, nearly 10 per cent higher than its 1984 peak, and has gone almost unfailingly higher since. One would have thought that with a Democratic Southern governor winning the presidency in 1992, Southerners would have been more likely to come back to the Democratic Party; yet the reverse happened. It may be that racial politics alienated white Southern democrats, but proponents of this view must improve the connection between legislation in 1965 and the stunning jump in polarization nearly 30 years later.

Yet another hypothesis is the rise of divisive issues (cf. Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Brady and Han, 2006, p. 144; Cannon, 2006, p. 169; Edsall, 2006,

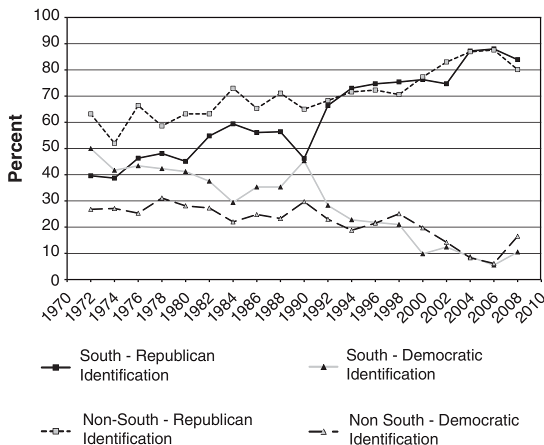

Figure 2: Party identification of white conservatives, 1972–2008.
Source: Jacobson (2011).

pp. 291–292; Galston and Nivola, 2006, p. 22; Jacobson, 2006, p. 95). The polarization we see at the voter level seems to stem from a sorting process where more clearly defined parties attract elements of the electorate that are animated by various issues (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009). Still, divisive issues have been around since time immemorial – why are they sometimes more divisive than others? It is poorly understood why the same issue causes greater cleavages at various times, and why different issues elicit the responses they do. The 1960s and 1970s were violent, vitriolic and polarizing decades; nevertheless, they did not engender the degree of polarization seen today. Why would abortion cause a significant upstroke in polarization 20 years after *Roe v. Wade*? Why would gay marriage be more polarizing than racial integration? Why would recurrent religious issues come to the fore with such alacrity around 1992?

More recently, scholars have charted the increased importance of partisan predispositions related to the Iraq war. John Mueller marvels: 'This [partisanship over a war] is totally unprecedented… It's so extreme, it's really off the charts. We're in a new era' (quoted in Cannon, 2006, p. 170). What foreign policy consensus there was during the Korean and Vietnam wars has broken down in spectacular fashion (Holsti, 1996, pp. 31, 133–134, 187; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2005; Toner and Rutenberg, 2006). On this view, the Iraq war polarized the country and polarized citizens' views of the president. What is it about the Iraq war that differs from other wars?

Jacobson ventures (2007, p. 117) that the difference is the voluntary and preventive nature of the Iraq War. True, Iraq was a preventive war of choice,

but so were many others. No scholar has systematically demonstrated that Iraq today is more voluntary or preventive than Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Kosovo and Afghanistan. No existing measure explains why Iraq would polarize the country more effectively than Vietnam did; more noncombatants and American soldiers are not dying in Iraq, nor have graver atrocities come to light there. The Iraq War already displayed more partisan difference early on than any US conflict since 1945 (Jacobson, 2007, pp. 117, 133–138).

Similarly, the media is typically listed as a cause of polarization. Burgeoning sources of news, notably cable television and the Internet, segment the marketplace of ideas and allow partisans to screen out dissonant information (Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006, p. 110; Mann, 2006, p. 264; Jacobson, 2007, p. 250). Another variant of this reasoning is that the media drums up polarization for selfish reasons, novelty and conflict being good for business (Fiorina *et al*, 2006, pp. 21–22, 191).

But as Diana Mutz (2006, pp. 230–231) points out (cf. Mutz, 2007, pp. 632–634; McDonald, 1979, pp. 72–75; Wood, 1993, chapter 4; Snyder, 2000, pp. 56–66), in the past it was much easier for a partisan press to expose information to the electorate selectively. Like other arguments, crediting the media with polarization does not address adequately the timing of polarization's biggest growth. The Internet was not in widespread use in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and bastions of overtly partisan programming arrived after the spike in polarization. So too, sensationalism and negativity have long been profitable.

Could the decline of competitive congressional districts have resulted in current levels of polarization? Possibly partisan and racial gerrymandering of districts resulted in district voters who were more homogeneous in their partisan and/or ideological outlooks (Theriault, 2008, Chapter 4). These voters would elect more ideologically extreme representatives who could easily hold their seats. Since Senators have similarly polarized unaided by gerrymandering, claims of less competitive districts seem feeble. Primary voters have also proven to be an unlikely cause of partisan polarization (Abramowitz, 2008). Furthermore, while the number of competitive congressional districts declined in the mid-1960s and generally stayed low in the 1970s and 1980s, competition actually increased in the 1990s, an era of pronounced polarization (Abramowitz *et al*, 2006; Fiorina *et al*, 2006, pp. 214–215; Mann, 2006, pp. 266–267).

Personality-driven explanations

Lastly, American polarization is sometimes blamed on divisive people, for instance Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich and George W. Bush (Fiorina and

Levendusky, 2006, pp. 109–110; Fiorina *et al*, 2006, pp. 180, 182; Jacobson, 2007; cf. Hetherington and Weiler, 2009). This could be the case, but the hypothesis is not presently formulated in a generalizable fashion. In fact, it appears tautological - we know divisive characters because the electorate was divided. For the hypothesis to be testable we have to say what about these politicians makes them divisive.

Divisive personalities are more a symptom than a source of polarization. During much less polarized periods, the United States saw many potentially polarizing leaders: Joseph McCarthy, Douglas MacArthur, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, etc. In contrast, George H.W. Bush was known for his mild-mannered personality and upstanding character, but at the end of his presidential term the difference in his presidential approval ratings between Republicans and Democrats spanned over 50 points, comparable to the more publicly dynamic presidents who bookended his term (Jacobson, 2007, p. 7).

Naturally, personalities interact with issues. Barry Goldwater realigned some voters and redefined his party by promoting states rights. Ronald Reagan did the same by speaking to abortion concerns. Nevertheless, individually or combined, issues and personalities are factors more asserted than shown to cause polarization, and all explanations struggle with the timing of the greatest increase in America's polarization.

Testing the Argument

To test the argument, we examine a 60-year period following the Second World War. This timeframe has a number of analytical advantages. It is long enough to record wide variations in our independent and dependent variables, and stake a claim to broad validity, but short enough to be competently covered at article length. It surveys the most data rich period, and a time of nuclear power and great power peace, improving its relevance to the present.

Above all, it examines critical cases. Disconfirming evidence is most clear during bipolarity and unipolarity. Because we contend that incentives for internal balancing correlate with polarization, assessing the argument in multipolarity is impossible in this space. Where alliances are more important they can undermine internal balancing in ways that are difficult to measure. American polarization was higher before the country became a superpower (Brady and Han, 2006; McCarty *et al*, 2006, p. 9), but it is hard to control for how much the United States relied on others for its security in this period or how much changes in technology shifted power projection capability and altered America's strategic environment. There is evidence that our argument may explain the sweep of American history well, but currently insufficient data exists to establish this, and so multipolarity and second-tier powers cannot be

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dealt with in an article-length treatment. Subsequent work may attempt to control for these factors, but the present work has more modest ambitions.

For our dependent variable, we adopt the most-used measure of polarization, McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal's operationalization, which tracks the distance between the average ideal point of Republican House members and the average ideal point of Democratic House members (measured with DW-NOMINATE scores) in each congressional session (McCarty *et al*, 1997, Appendix A; 2006, pp. 3–6). We use polarization in the House over the Senate because, while the two have a correlation of 0.94 (Jacobson, 2007, p. 24), the House measure is the more commonly used metric, and it is more responsive to changes in the political climate due to the House's institutional design.[3]

Operationalizing our independent variable is challenging for two reasons: structural arguments are often hard to measure and there is no perfect operationalization of power. To detail these problems serially, the international distribution of power is what we refer to as structure. Structure, according to Waltz (1979, p. 73), 'designates a set of constraining conditions. Such a structure acts as a selector, but it cannot be seen, examined, and observed at work like livers and income taxes can be'.

Like other structural arguments, our causal mechanisms are negative feedback and socialization. In American politics, political elites receive negative feedback through elections, which sack politicians that are insufficiently responsive to constituent needs. The House of Representatives and especially the Senate are well known for their socializing influences, and nonconforming elites find themselves ostracized and weak. Unfortunately, these mechanisms are better at showing *that* nonconforming behavior is unsuccessful than *why* such behavior is unsuccessful.

To be sure, sometimes elites blame the limits of their actions on the balance of power. America's founders are an example of the integrating power of weakness. During Constitutional ratification, James Madison arrested an escalating debate over slavery by declaring, 'Great as the evil is, a dismemberment of the Union would be worse. If those states should disunite from the other states for not indulging them in the temporary continuance of this traffic, they might solicit and obtain aid from foreign powers' (Madison in Amar, 2005, p. 120). Tom Daschle provides an example of the disintegrative power of strength: 'The Cold War exerted a powerful hold on America, and it forced the parties to work together to advance American interests through bipartisan internationalism …. The tragedy is that such cooperation increasingly seems an artifact of the past' (1996, pp. 4–5). Yet while such quotes are suggestive, structural arguments do not rise and fall with the consciousness or immediate intentions of actors.

Structural arguments are hard to prove since they may work behind the backs of participants; the essence of decision is notoriously hard to pin down.

Plus, politicians in particular are not known for their candor, concision or self-awareness. Outcomes may be unintended and caused indirectly by uncomprehending agents, which makes a tight causal chain elusive. Many classic arguments are of this mold. Adam Smith's invisible hand remains valid even if the butcher, brewer and baker are not aiming to maximize their nation's domestic capital stock. Evolutionary theory remains valid even if mating couples do not explain their behavior as an attempt to maximize genetic fitness.

The same methodological point applies to international relations theories as well. A democratic peace appears to have been functioning decades before democratic peace theory (whose mechanisms remain uncertain) came to prominence. Or as Norman Angell, Joseph Schumpeter and John Mueller have posited, great power war has been an obsolete practice for some time – whatever elites, atavistic or otherwise, may have thought about it. Balance of power theory remains valid even if diplomats do not justify their treaties with balance of power language. And our argument may hold even if elites do not perceive a link between power and polarization. Although the causal nexuses of structural arguments are not as direct or accessible as many would like, it would be Procrustean to dismiss them for this reason.

Another difficulty is that power is an essentially contested concept and controversial to operationalize. Power is complex; the actors that interpret it are enormously intricate; perceptions are loosely coupled with objective measures; and governments struggle to respond to shifts in power with agility and unity of effort (Jervis, 1985; Friedberg, 1988, Chapter 6; Wohlforth, 1993, pp. 10, 15, 294–296; Farnham, 1997, pp. 135–136; Edelstein, 2002). William Wohlforth (1993, p. 16) argues that balance of power frameworks are 'ubiquitous and necessary', but plagued by a parade of problems:

> Power cannot be tested; different elements of power possess different utilities at different times; the relation of perceived power to material resources can be capricious; the mechanics of power are surrounded by uncertainty; states possess different conversion ratios and comparative advantages; the perceived prestige hierarchy and the military distribution may not coincide for prolonged periods; states adopt asymmetrical strategies to maximize their positions and undercut rivals; signals get confused among allies, rivals, and domestic audiences. Drawing boxes and circles around these various sources of ambiguity and connecting them with lines and arrows will not make their interrelation any clearer. (1993, p. 307)

For lack of better alternative, we measure power in the most traditional manner. Power is a measure of a state's military and industrial capability relative to other states.

Notice that because we conceive of power as neorealists do, not all conflicts are created equal. Terrorism and asymmetric conflicts are unlikely to be as threatening as peer competition, which often overshadows and subsumes lesser conflicts. While the potency of terrorism may increase in time, the present evidence does not warrant adopting a less conventional and more controversial conceptualization of power to accommodate terrorism (Layne, 2004; Jervis, 2005, p. 52; Mueller, 2006). So, too, by realist measures, asymmetric conflicts affect the analysis little. America's relative power was not radically altered by asymmetric conflicts, like the Vietnam War, and so asymmetric conflicts are not accommodated in our treatment of power.

To make our findings as robust, accurate and convincing as possible, we subject the argument to several overlapping tests. We begin with a simple statistical test of polarization levels in eras of bipolarity versus unipolarity. The next test is a qualitative linking of changes in power to polarization in postwar America. To minimize controversy, we subordinate our interpretations of the period to those of preeminent diplomatic historians. This is followed by more extensive quantitative tests which examine the relationship between power and polarization over time.

Two conventional measures fit well with a simple notion of power: the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) and military expenditures, both from the Correlates of War Project (Singer *et al*, 1972). CINC scores are based on annual values for total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military personnel and military expenditure. Military expenditures are a ratio in current pounds sterling through 1913 and current dollars afterwards. Our measures are relative, and track the ratio of national capability or military expenditures between the USSR/Russia (or, after 1995, the next potential peer competitor, China) and the United States over time. As noted, we expect a short lag effect because our causal mechanisms do not have immediate impact. Notice that we operationalize power with little reliance on perceptual factors. This makes our argument more parsimonious, determinate and falsifiable.

There is not the space, the degrees of freedom in available data, or appropriate measures for time series analysis to do in-depth tests of every alternative explanation. We have already made the case that many of the above alternatives are more symptoms than sources of polarization. In addition, we seek to control for two of the most prominent predictors of polarization: income inequality and redistricting. Following the work of McCarty *et al* (2006, pp. 6–8), inequality is measured as the income share of the top 1 per cent of earners (Piketty and Saez, 2003). Data are averaged across congressional sessions to conform to the units of the dependent variable. To see if Congressional redistricting has explanatory power, we predict elite polarization in the House and Senate, where redistricting does not apply, to see how they compare.

In sum, we seek the most convincing findings by using conventional conceptualizations of our variables, a battery of fair tests, and the best available data over the time span where contrary evidence would be most manifest. We test both a coarse version of our argument – polarity causes polarization – and refined versions of our argument – incremental shifts in power permit incremental shifts in polarization.

Empirical Support, 1945–2005

This section aims to answer several core questions about when polarization changes. Why was there little polarization at the beginning of the Cold War? Why did America begin to polarize in the mid-1960s? Why did this polarization dramatically escalate in the early 1990s? These critical junctures, in themselves, are important facets that are largely ignored in the polarization literature (Gelman *et al*, 2008, pp. 74–75).

Polarity and polarization: A simple statistical test

On a crude level, our argument relates polarity to polarization. A first, basic cut at the data asks what level of elite polarization existed in the 1945–1992 bipolar world as compared to the unipolar world that followed. If our argument is correct, we should see bipolarity correlating with low polarization and unipolarity correlating with high polarization. This is in fact the case. Polarization increased substantially and significantly ($t = 11.51$, $P = 0.00$ according to a one-sample t test) from years of bipolar competition (mean = 0.56, standard deviation = 0.05) to years of unipolar domination (mean = 0.78, standard deviation = 0.06). Next we tie this increase more precisely to relative power.

A qualitative perspective

The consensus of premier diplomatic historians and international relations scholars is that the first 15-20 years of the Cold War were the most uncertain (Wohlforth, 1993, pp. 176, 182; Gaddis, 1998, p. 261; 2005, pp. 210–211; Trachtenberg, 1999, p. 398). This period corresponds with record low levels of American polarization. With the devastation of World War II, the United States reaped an enormous improvement in its relative power, but by the late 1940s, the USSR's rising economy and military capability formed a mounting challenge.

As America's lead in relative power shrank, domestic consensus became more imperative. Low polarization scores are not the only evidence of this. Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt is only the most public manifestation of the premium placed on conformity. At the highest levels, dissent grew more costly. As Benjamin Fordham relates (1998, p. 190), officials that believed in smaller defense budgets – like Frank Pace, Louis Johnson and Edwin Nourse – were shown the door for their beliefs. Potentially divisive issues were approached with extreme caution.

There is good evidence that the argument's two causal mechanisms – elections and socialization – were at work. Politicians treated civil rights reform, for instance, with reluctance and aversion until they became much bolder in a short period of time. Hubert Humphrey personifies the fortunes of civil rights champions during the Cold War. Humphrey's impassioned speech at the 1948 Democratic Convention found many delegates sympathetic to his civil rights ideals. But when Humphrey went to Washington to put those ideals in practice, he was ostracized. Voters were faint in their support and Senators scorned him. After being shunned for years and battered by Senate norms, he was 'lonely, broke, and bitter' (Thurber, 1999, p. 73; cf. pp. 74–75, 81) and in 1955 he admitted he had 'stopped kicking the wall' (Solberg, 1984, p. 164). Socialization had worked. Even with a more constructive attitude, Humphrey could not pass effective legislation for almost a decade. The 1957 civil rights law that did pass was a shell; 'two years later not a single southern black had been added to the voting rolls and nothing had been accomplished for other civil rights' (Dallek, 2003, p. 217). In fact, the most significant step toward civil rights in the 1950s was taken by the least responsive branch to public opinion, in the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

This trend continued into the early 1960s. Both sides of the civil rights debate framed their discourse in terms of the Cold War – accusing the other side of being tools of the Kremlin – but stability trumped progress. Initially, President Kennedy spent little political capital on civil rights. When asked why he refused to advocate for blacks in the Alabama National Guard, Kennedy replied, 'I may have to send the Alabama National Guard to Berlin tomorrow and I don't want to do it in the middle of a revolution at home' (Dallek, 2003, p. 332). Kennedy further justified his wary stance by saying that not even a 1962lbill, allowing those with more than a sixth grade education to vote, could surmount a filibuster (Dallek, 1998, p. 31) – what chance did substantial legislation have?

Sometime near 1963, a turning point was reached. Around this inflection point Soviet growth flagged (see Figure 3) and, despite gains in Soviet nuclear production and jousting on the periphery, the military balance was more or less a stalemate. As Mueller (1994, p. 7) observes: 'during the 1950s the public was asked dozens of times if it expected World War III to erupt in the near future, but for some reason the question went out of fashion around 1963'. Around

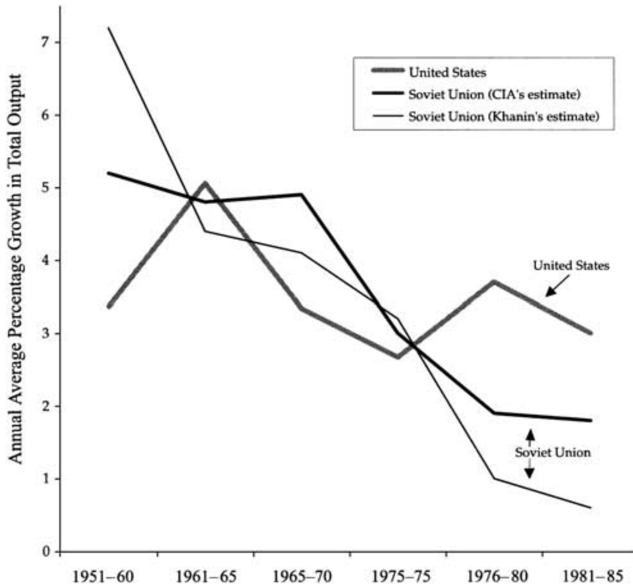

Figure 3: Average annual percentage growth in total output, United States versus USSR, 1951–1985. *Source*: Brooks and Wohlforth (2000/2001).

the same time, the percentage of Americans favoring less defense spending jumped from 10 per cent to over 50 per cent and stayed high (Russett, 1975, p. 3). The relative power disparity during the remainder of the Cold War rarely approached the levels before 1960, but were consistently above those in the post-Cold War era. This intermediate level of power was matched by intermediate levels of polarization. With the world safer from direct superpower conflict, the United States was safer for domestic dissent.

Systemic pressures shifted and politicians and the public reacted to a shifting incentive structure. Kennedy had excised all domestic issues from his inaugural speech, but he returned to them with a vengeance. In late 1962, Kennedy slashed the top marginal tax rates, dropping them from 91 to 70 per cent for individuals and from 20 to 14 per cent for corporations (Patterson, 1996, pp. 465–467). Two days represent this political climate change best. Whereas previously Kennedy had been more aggressive on foreign policy than on civil rights issues, by the middle of 1963 those positions switched. On 10 June 1963, Kennedy made a celebrated speech at American University, arguing for a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty, greater support for the United Nations, and peace. The next day, he gave a nationally televised address on race, condemning civil rights opponents as has had never done before (Borstelmann, 2001, pp. 161–162).

Public opinion reflected this environmental shift too, albeit more slowly. In late 1963, 27 per cent approved of the Kennedy administration's pace with civil rights; by April 1964, 57 per cent approved of the Johnson's administration's similar handling of the issue (Dallek, 1998, p. 114). And race relations were only the most prominent social issues that jolted into motion at this time after years of agitation (Patterson, 1996, pp. 37, 431, 447–449, 711). Politicians who grasped this changing environment slowly received the negative feedback of not getting elected. Major breakthroughs in civil rights legislation followed in the wake of détente, and that timing is not accidental.

The 1970s and 1980s continued the trends of the 1960s: decreasing Soviet power and increasing American polarization. This is by no means a claim that tranquility prevailed. Arms racing, proxy wars, crises and more made this period tumultuous. Yet compared to the fierce, fumbling period that preceded it, the second half of the Cold War was less uncertain than the first. The military balance was sturdy enough not to be tipped by massive collections of additional nuclear warheads. Both sides suffered losses in the field, both economies slowed, but they did not slow equally. The US economy had a large and commanding lead that was widening. The wilting Soviet economy collapsed and the country disintegrated into oblivion at the end of 1991 (Evangelista, 1999; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2000/2001; Lobel, 2001, Chapter 6). Doubtless there were frightening and uncertain times – wars in Vietnam, the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Reagan arms build-up and the fall of the wall – and our argument does not pick up all the variation. Yet overall, the trend held impressively: growing American power meant increasing polarization.

America had won the Cold War, but victory, as Georg Simmel remarks (1964, p. 98), 'lowers the energy which guarantees the unity of the group; and the dissolving forces, which are always at work, gain hold'. Unipolarity ignited ongoing polarization. Japanese economic growth hinted at a new potential peer competitor; however, Japan went into a protracted recession not long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and America was left scanning the horizon. Stephen Walt notes (2002, p. 127), 'America's recent enemies have been the isolated and impoverished regimes in Cuba, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and North Korea, a set of regimes that possess little power and even less international support'.

Unipolarity transformed American politics. As illustrations, consider taxes and conscription. The rich were asked to make much deeper sacrifices during the Cold War than after it; in the mid-1950s the top income tax rate was 91 per cent – compared to 35 per cent presently (Krugman, 2007, pp. 47–48). Obviously the sacrifices requested were not just in treasure, they were in blood too. When America faced the prospect of massive combat operations against a peer competitor, it retained and occasionally implemented the draft. As that

prospect receded, the draft became unpalatable and has not been politically viable since, necessitating reliance on the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) and, increasingly, mercenaries (Singer, 2003; Bacevich, 2008, pp. 154–155).

Or contrast debates over the 1956 National Interstate and Defense Highways Act with the current debate over further purchases of the F-22 fighter plane. In the former case, major infrastructural spending was justified on military grounds while in the latter case major military spending is justified largely on economic grounds (Jackson, 1985, p. 249; Kay, 1997, p. 232; Kaplan, 2009). The explanatory emphasis on *why* the federal government needs to spend tax dollars has decisively shifted from defense to domestic grounds.

America's growing power has affected governmental appointments that should have been the most resistant to polarization (Nelson *et al*, 2009, pp. 1775–1776). An example in this category is the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI). Richard Betts chronicles the decreasing frequency with which DCIs are 'ostensibly nonpolitical' (2007, p. 98). This decline happened in a manner consistent with our argument. Until the middle of 1965, only one – Allen Dulles – of the first six DCIs was visibly partisan. From that point to the end of the Cold War, three of the next eight DCIs were partisan (that is, James Schlesinger, George H.W. Bush and William Casey). Following the Cold War, only one – Michael Hayden – of the next seven DCIs was not visibly partisan (though George Tenet's appointment was partisan his continuance in the post was not). The rate of partisan DCIs rises from 17 per cent in the first half of the Cold War, to 38 per cent in last half, to 86 per cent after the Cold War.

Today, the United States spends about as much on defense as the rest of the world combined, disburses 80 per cent of the world's military-related research and development budget, and labors actively to advance its lead (Ikenberry, 2002, pp. 1–2; Posen, 2003; Press and Lieber, 2006; SIPRI, 2006; Kaplan, 2007). For centuries, no hegemon has had as much relative capability as contemporary America (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002; Wohlforth, 2002, p. 105). Accentuating this dominance, the United States confronts no balancing coalition worthy of the name to check its power (Joffe, 1995; Betts, 2005; Lieber and Alexander, 2005). China is the odds-on favorite to reach peer competitor status, but experts caution that its rise is often overstated (Roy, 1994; Segal, 1999, p. 24). While posing some difficulties to American foreign policy (Betts and Christensen, 2000/2001; Kang, 2003; Christensen, 2006), China continues to trail far behind American military capabilities (Ross, 1997; Lewis and Litai, 1999; Ross, 2004, pp. 291–292; Press and Lieber, 2006).

Surely, US foreign policy faces problems, most notoriously terrorism and costly occupations. But from a realist perspective, the gap between hegemon and challenger is what is most important, and that appears to be narrowing gradually (MacDonald and Parent, 2011, p. 42). Since the end of the Cold War,

America has possessed unusually high security and, in accord with our argument, unusually high levels of polarization.

Power and polarization: CINC and military expenditures

Turning to more in-depth quantitative tests of our argument, we start by standardizing and plotting three relevant series: the relative CINC scores of the United States and the Soviet Union, inequality in the United States, and the DW-NOMINATE measure of polarization (see Figure 4).

The polarization series increases slowly from the 90th congress in 1967–1968, gaining speed in the 95th congress in 1977–‘978, and attains its steepest incline in the early 1990s, not before. Inequality declines from the mid-1940s until the early 1970s. It then plateaus until the early 1980s when it begins to grow at an increasing rate. The national capability of the Soviet Union relative to the United States begins quite low in the post-World War II era, but trends upward at a strong and steady rate until the mid-1970s. It then increases at a much slower rate until the late 1980s when it declines quickly.

Since the three series trend substantially, there is evidence that past values of any series will influence its future values so that a simple regression analysis predicting the outcome by the covariates could yield spurious relationships. Statistical analysis confirms that this is the case.[4] The best solution is to de-trend the series via differencing. We subtract current values of each series by

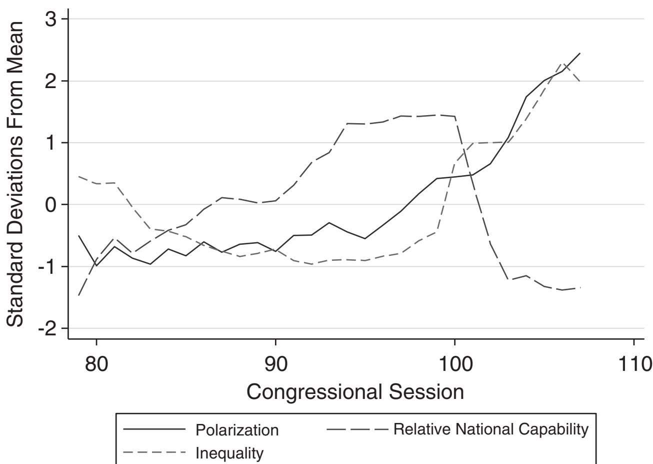

Figure 4: Standardized polarization, inequality and relative national capability, 79th to 107th Congress.

their lagged values. This allows us to study the impact of a change in the relative national capability score (or in inequality) on the change in elite polarization.[5] The changed or differenced series are shown in Figure 5 after standardization (variables are not standardized in the analysis below, however).

Changes in the relative capability score or inequality should not affect contemporaneous changes in polarization.[6] Rather, changes in the predictors (relative national capability and inequality) should impact the dependent variable (polarization) at a later period. Given the units (congressional sessions), it is not intuitive to understand the optimal lag structure for variables in the model. But a congressional session is two years, and since our model relies on elections and socialization, we expect the optimal lag structure to be one to two units. To test this, we begin by predicting changes in polarization by changes in the predictors at one lag and include further lags until the model fit proves most strong. Table 1 shows the result.

The first column of Table 1 tracks changes in the CINC index and inequality levels during a current congressional session to see how they impact changes in elite polarization in the next congressional session. While inequality is insignificant, the relative capability of the Soviet Union to the United States is negative and significant. As the Soviet Union's relative capability increases, elite polarization in the US House decreases. However, the model's explanatory power is low. The two predictors combined explain 9 per cent of the variability in the dependent variable.

The second column of Table 1 shows a model where changes in elite polarization are predicted by changes in the predictors at one and two lags.

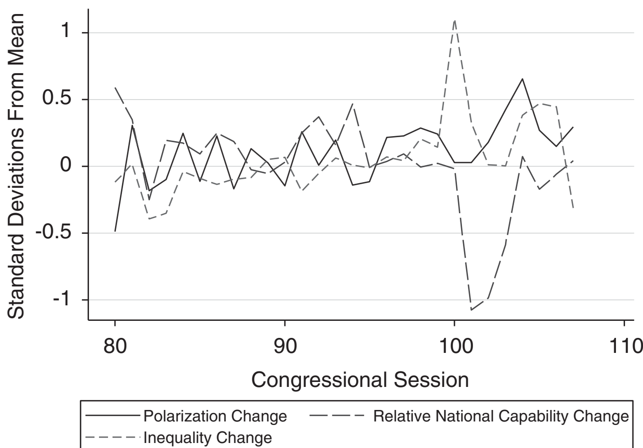

Figure 5: Differenced series of standardized polarization, inequality and relative national capability, 79th to 107th Congress.

Table 1: Dependent variable = Partisan polarization in the house of representatives (79th–107th Congress)

ΔCINC ratio	−0.07*	−0.02	−0.02
1 lag	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.06)
ΔInequality	0.00	−0.00	−0.00
1 lag	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
ΔCINC ratio	—	−0.11**	−0.04
2 lags	—	(0.04)	(0.06)
ΔInequality	—	0.00	−0.00
2 lags	—	(0.01)	(0.01)
ΔCINC ratio	—	—	−0.06
3 lags	—	—	(0.04)
ΔInequality	—	—	0.01
3 lags	—	—	(0.01)
Constant	0.01**	0.01***	0.01**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
RMSE	0.02	0.02	0.02
Adj. R^2	0.09	0.41	0.35
N	27	26	25

*$P<0.05$, **$P<0.01$, ***$P<0.001$.

Neither relative national capability nor inequality is significant at the first lag. Inequality remains insignificant at the second lag. However, relative national capability significantly predicts polarization two time periods (congressional sessions) out. The root mean squared error is approximately the same in this equation as in the last but the explanatory power of this equation is vastly superior. Forty-one per cent of the variability in changes in polarization can be explained by changes in the predictors. Column 3 of Table 1 shows that including further lags does not improve model fit. In this last model, it is worth noting that when the coefficients for relative national capability lagged twice and thrice are constrained (not shown), the resulting parameter is highly significant and has a magnitude of −0.05.[7] Including additional lags beyond three hurts the model's explanatory power still more.

An increase in the capability of the Soviet Union relative to the United States leads to a significant decrease in the extent of elite polarization in the US House. Income inequality does not perform as well. The results are much the same if we change the dependent variable from a measure of House polarization to a measure of Senate polarization.[8] Varying the measure of inequality also does not substantially change the result.[9] As with any research using ideal point estimates, it is impossible to disentangle whether this divergence in roll call voting behavior occurred because politicians were changing (via socialization or, more likely, replacement) or the set of bills on

which they were voting was changing. Whatever the process, the shrinking might and eventual disintegration of the Soviet Union permitted polarization between Republicans and Democrats to advance rapidly.

These findings are robust; multiple other operationalizations show similar results. Since the Soviet Union ceased to exist and Russia's international sway was severely curtailed after the empire's collapse, it may make sense to view China as the United States' nearest competitor after the mid-1990s. This measure is limited in that it does a poor job of representing the move from a bipolar to a unipolar world in the 1990s, but it does offer a complementary, and harder, test of our argument. Column 1 of Table 2 shows results when the national relative capability score compares the Soviet Union to the United States until 1995 and then China thereafter.

Another possible measure of power is the ratio of military expenditures between Russia and the United States. If Russia spends more on defense than the United States, then American relative power is low, and when Russia's spending is low relative to the United States, America's relative power is high. This is the measure used for the estimates in column 2 of Table 2. Still another measure of power, used for the estimates in column 3 of Table 2, is relative military expenditures compared to Russia until 1995 and then China thereafter. Each regression is analyzed using the same lag structure and differencing of

Table 2: Dependent variable = Partisan polarization in the house of representatives (79th–107th Congress)

Various operationalizations of power	*ΔCINC ratio (US/China post-1995)*	*ΔMilitary expenditure ratio*	*ΔMilitary expenditure ratio (US/China post-1995)*
ΔPower	0.00	−0.01	−0.01
1 lag	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
ΔPower	−0.09*	−0.04*	−0.04*
2 lags	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
ΔInequality	0.00	0.00	0.00
1 lags	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
ΔInequality	0.01	0.00	0.00
2 lags	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	0.01**	0.01*	0.01**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
RMSE	0.02	0.02	0.02
Adj. R^2	0.24	0.14	0.15
N	26	26	26

*$P<0.05$, **$P<0.01$, ***$P<0.001$.

variables as above.[10] Regardless of operationalization, an increase in power significantly reduces polarization at two lags.

We included income inequality as a control in the model because it is thought to be one of the strongest explicators of polarization. Yet strikingly and repeatedly, inequality proved to be an insignificant cause of polarization. This is consistent with our claim that international structure underlies both polarization and its correlates. By our logic then, it makes better sense to predict inequality by the relative capability score. If such a model continues to support our theory regarding power and polarization outlined earlier, then it helps to negate concerns that the findings above might be driven purely by changes in the legislative agenda (for example, a larger number of popular defense bills being considered when relative power is low). While such changes do constitute one process by which polarization can occur, we believe that variation in power causes profound changes in the way actors politick.

In this equation, the units of analysis are years and the optimal lag structure is three years, as determined by optimizing degrees of freedom and the explanatory power of the model. The independent variable is the relative capability score of USSR/Russia compared to the United States, as in Table 1. Again, the variables are differenced to remove long-term trends. At the third lag, the relative capability score has a negative and highly significant ($P=0.011$) effect on inequality, explaining 10 per cent of the variability in inequality changes. As Soviet relative capability increases, income inequality in the United States drops. Or, as peer competitors fall behind, inequality, like polarization, increases. Why? As detailed in the argument section above, this is likely to be the case because actors push distributional issues most aggressively when the need for coordination with fellow citizens is low. In short, the rich can throw their weight around more when they need the cooperation of the poor less. This is an original empirical finding worthy of underscoring and further research. Moreover, it provides evidence that power promotes disunity more fundamentally than just influencing the agenda of House roll calls.

The units of analysis in the equations described above vary. When predicting polarization by inequality and the relative capability score, the units were congressional sessions to accommodate the measure of our dependent variable. When predicting inequality by the relative capability score, the units were years. Nevertheless, the findings are consistent; polarization is significantly impacted by power two congressional sessions out, and the same is true for income inequality three years out.

In sum, there is an elegant explanation for polarization's vicissitudes. In the early Cold War, America's declining relative power fueled consensus and conformity. After détente, this process reversed, widening disputes and diversity. With the end of the Cold War, America's unparalleled power allowed for exceptional polarization. This explanation is robust across a range

of operationalizations, correlating well not just at critical historical junctures but also over smaller time intervals.

Application: When Will American Polarization End?

Every other major explanation predicts polarization will gain momentum; we do not. For some (McCarty *et al*, 2006, pp. 199–202), inequality is the pith of polarization. If inequality propels polarization, the end is not near. Piketty and Saez, 2003, p. 37 (cp. Fogel, 2000, pp. 156–157) connect the decrease in progressive taxation since the early 1980s to large inequality well into the future. Barring drastic, unforeseen changes in technology, lifestyle or executive compensation, polarization is here to stay and probably grow.

For others (for example, Brady and Han, 2006, pp. 150–151; McCarty *et al*, 2006, pp. 199–202; Bishop, 2008, p. 301; Miller and Schofield, 2008), electoral shifts may reverse polarization. The Republican Party could split if its economic and religious conservative wings develop an antipathy to each other. The Republicans could make policy errors with respect to the Alternative Minimum Tax and drive voters into the Democratic fold. Or exogenous shocks like terrorism or another depression could discredit the policies of one or the other party. Yet politicians have voted against the party line, congressional control has switched between parties, exogenous shocks have happened, and that does not seem to narrow the distance between poles of disagreement.

Still others (Mann, 2006, pp. 281–283; Brownstein, 2007, pp. 378–384; Packer, 2011, p. 30) see a cure in leadership or institutional change. One remedy is to forsake reform originating from within mainstream politics and hope for a Theodore Roosevelt-like figure, such as Michael Bloomberg, to build a centrist coalition. This only begs the questions of why neither party assembles a centrist coalition and why third parties fare so poorly. Another nostrum is colossal institutional reform: overhaul the Electoral College, introduce some form of proportional representation, reorganize the primary process and radically revise campaign finance. It is safe to say that none of these expedients are likely to be adopted soon, and so the polarized *status quo* will persist. Lastly, there is resignation to a polarized future and acceptance of such a handicap in policy-making (Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007, pp. 40–44). No other work focuses its policy recommendations on international security, and one work states (Hall and Lindholm, 1999, p. 76) that primacy is what makes American domestic politics stable and unified.

We reach different predictions than rival views, and this makes falsifying our argument easier. American polarization will correlate with relative power, and the principal actors promoting or retarding polarization are potential peer competitors. There are several prime candidates: China, a unified Europe, and,

more remotely, India and Russia. As any or all of these contenders approach America's level of power, we predict that polarization should begin to level off and fall. Our optimism on polarization's decline is based on the questionable but widely held assumption that China will rise to peer competitor status in the foreseeable future (*Economist*, 2007, p. 12). Although non-state threats (for example, terrorism, disease, environmental degradation, economic depression) may yet reveal themselves to be as influential as great power politics, our evidence suggests that traditional measures of power offer firm purchase for the present.

Conclusion: Unipolarized America

The central point of this article is that American polarization may have as much to do with what is going on outside the country as inside it. Scarcities of power thrust parties together, surpluses of power pushes parties apart. Across the best available data and various operationalizations, our findings are significant and robust. Certainly there are other factors at work, but the explanatory prowess of relative power deserves greater attention. We agree that the connection between security and unity is an introductory international relations insight, but it is apparently not prevalent in American politics because no previous argument has centered on it or attempted to measure it.

Other major findings concern the international origins of domestic inequality and the insignificance of inequality as a provenance of polarization. Today's discussion on American inequality assumes it is the product of technology, social capital, the returns of hard work, education, and so on. We do not disagree these are contributors, yet we find these arguments incomplete and suggest that economic views be braced by political perspectives. Our evidence suggests that income inequality is partially the product of enemy states' relative power, and that inequality is not the chief cause of polarization.

A crucial upshot of our argument is that the United States faces a dilemma between conflict abroad and conflict at home. Without large dragons to contend with overseas, Americans will find domestic foes to demonize instead. The result is trading between problems, and the readers shall judge which problems are preferable. But we predict that as China becomes a peer competitor polarization will gradually diminish, institutional stalemates will abate, and American foreign policy will regain its luster.

The Founders based American government on the belief that concentrations of power corrupt. Yet through their skill and good fortune, they created a state that has become the largest concentration of international power in centuries. As some Americans strive for strength beyond challenge, they should be aware of the probable consequences. US unipolarity is not only a recipe for imperious

international conduct; it is also a recipe for nastier domestic faction. The first action tends to provoke balancing coalitions, the second paves the path for internecine strife, but both crop hegemonic power. Naturally, neither outcome is inevitable, and much depends on how Americans use their anomalously large autonomy while it lasts. Nonetheless, sooner or later unipolarity will end; the lot left to decision-makers is how to make a virtue of this necessity.

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Notes

1 Although we are arguing that in times of safety people 'argue around the flag', our claims are connected to but distinct from the celebrated and contested 'rally round the flag' effect, where recourse to force galvanizes a public behind its leader(s), because we seek to explain polarization, not approval ratings, and our analytical time horizon is longer. See Mueller (1985, pp. 53, 58), cf. Brody (1991, p. 77), Zaller (1992, p. 119), Trubowitz and Mellow (2005, pp. 446, 449).

2 Gourevitch (1986, pp. 63–65). Second image reversed arguments are outside in; that is, they lay stress on how the international environment conditions internal state dynamics. Second image reversed arguments are typically contrasted with second image explanations that take an inside

out view. In second image arguments, internal state traits are the key factors driving outcomes like foreign policy and war proneness (Rosecrance and Stein eds., 1993; Milner, 1997; Trubowitz, 1998; Narizny, 2007).

3 Congressional representatives face elections every 2 years, while members of the Senate face election every 6 years with a third of the seats up every 2 years.
4 Regression analyses predicting each of the series by their lagged values shows that we cannot reject the null hypothesis of a unit root.
5 Variously specified error correction models show similar results.
6 A model including concurrent changes shows that this is true.
7 The coefficients cannot be interpreted substantively since neither the key predictor nor the dependent variable has an intuitive metric.
8 While no parameter estimate achieves conventional levels of statistical significance when Senate polarization is investigated, changes in power at one lag are nearly significant ($P=0.11$) and inequality continues to perform less well. The explanatory power of the model predicting Senate polarization ($R^2=0.06$) is lower than in the model predicting House polarization ($R^2=0.41$). This is likely due to the greater responsiveness exhibited by members of the House, who are elected every 2 years.
9 We have also tested our model using income share of the top 10 per cent of earners (Saez's 2008 data archive) and the Gini coefficient of family income (US Census data). All our measures of inequality correlate at over 0.9. Substituting in the Gini coefficient, changes in power continue to be significant at two lags ($P=0.023$). Changes in the Gini coefficient are significant at one lag ($P=0.044$). In this equation, the adjusted $R^2=0.47$ and power remains the strongest predictor of polarization. Using the top 10 per cent of earners rather than the top 1 per cent makes no difference in the result.
10 In some instances, including a third lag improved the explanatory power of the regression, but the substantive result remained the same.

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