

Economic and Social Divides

Karan Gupta – Persily Chapter 12: Data Science for the People

Candidates are very strategic about entering races. If voters, starved of the types of information needed to distinguish between candidates on the basis of ideology, fail to sufficiently reward candidates for their centrism and fail to punish others for their extremism, moderates become less likely to bear the cost of entry and less likely to win when they do.

Most experts doubt that ordinary citizens can ‘reason coherently about politics’, in other words they doubt the competence of voters. The question is whether voters actually lack the skills necessary to reason coherently about politics or whether they simply lack the information needed to do so. The key study in this group shows that voters are incapable of distinguishing moderate voters from the rest. Sniderman and Stiglitz examined whether voter competence was due to lack of ability or lack of information by asking whether respondents were able to apply spatial reasoning skills when choosing between candidates if the ideological position of candidates were taken as known. Their study revealed that voters were able to choose candidates closest to their preference after they were shown a visual cue about positions of candidates. This showed that the lack of voter competence was due to a lack of information not a lack of any inherent reasoning skills. Increasing the supply of candidate-information to voters could thus reduce partisan polarization, assuming that they would be more likely to support moderate candidates.

Many people view political donors as part of the problem, on the contrary they can be seen as part of the solution. Federal and state election agencies collect and disclose contribution records to safeguard democracy by increasing transparency. However, these databases can double as vast repositories of observational data on revealed political preferences. Donors carefully seek out political candidates who share their political preferences and this offers a way to learn about candidates and thus predict how they would behave if elected to office. This offers valuable information regarding the donors’ ideological preferences and the ideology of the candidates they support. Evidence shows that the predicted changes in congressional polarization measured by DW nominate scores track the actual changes. The significance of this methodology is that it can be used to help voters make informed decisions in the ballot booth since the measure can accurately predict how candidates would vote if they were elected to office. It offers an indication of which candidates will be most likely to serve as moderates and which will be most likely to serve as extremists. Until now, most methods to measure ideology have depended on legislative voting records, and these do not have the ability to measure the ideology of non-incumbent candidates before they take office. This has prevented information from being provided to voters regarding non-incumbent candidates. *The result of this new method (assuming voters are more likely to support moderates given correct information) would be a reduction in elite polarization. This would eventually lead to more centrist Congressional members being elected and less ideological extreme members.*

Daniel Xu – Persily Chapter 13: Curbing Political Polarization through GOTV

Political polarization in American politics has been encouraged by two newly-developing trends in party identification; more of the electorate is identifying themselves as Democrats or Republicans, and those partisan voters are now voting for candidates of the same party at a

higher rate than ever before. Scholars have different explanations for how this trend came to be, but agree on one worrying development. These partisan voters have grown to be ‘reflexively polarized’—voting for their own party’s candidate no matter how extreme their views, and automatically discounting the opposition. As a result, many have pointed to moderate voters—or rather, getting moderate voters to the polls—as a counter to partisan politics.

Moderates are more likely to cross the aisle and vote for candidates for reasons other than their political affiliation. They are less tethered to a single political party, and their presence can motivate candidates to shift their rhetoric towards the center rather than the extremes. However, many of those moderate or independent voters do not vote on election day, leading to the increased influence of partisan voters. As a result, one of the solutions to countering polarization is using Getting Out the Vote (GOTV) measures to encourage non-voting moderates to get to the polls—thereby decreasing partisanship and polarization.

Typically, GOTV efforts consist of face-to-face canvassing, phone calls, distribution of materials, voter education, mail campaigns, and many more initiatives. They are effective in encouraging more people to vote, but due to their financial costs, are usually used in a partisan fashion by the candidates with adequate resources to do so. Prior and Stroud propose for independent, non-affiliated operations to begin targeting moderates, rather than partisans, with GOTV. This way, more moderate positions and priorities would be represented at the polls than before—encouraging the political landscape to adjust in order to reflect that change.

Prior and Stroud propose using voter files and other electoral databases to determine which homes independent groups should target with their GOTV efforts. Such operations would provide potential voters with important information about elections that would directly affect them—thereby encouraging them to go and vote. Citizens would be told the times and dates of their elections, be given absentee forms if needed, and reminded of their civic duties.

Admittedly, there are some disadvantages to convincing a large group of non-voters to vote. Many of these individuals do not prioritize political participation, and therefore do not know much about the candidates, their respective parties, or the issues that they are campaigning on. Therefore, they are especially susceptible to misinformation—often promulgated by social media and other forms of communication. Additionally, there are many situations in which non-voters, or those perceived to be moderates, can actually behave like partisans. However, the overall benefits of using GOTV measures to target moderates far outweigh the negatives. Furthermore, if GOTV efforts aimed at moderates are coupled with informational campaigns, many of the possible issues could be mitigated.

Jane Geiger – Persily Chapter 15: Religiously Diverse Networks

With this chapter from *American Grace- How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, there is careful emphasis placed on the statistics to demonstrate religious diversity and opinions within the United States. Americans are beginning to live in more diverse neighborhoods, both culturally and religiously, but 93% of Americans believe all of the country is living areas strongly divided by race. 96% say the divisions in American society are based on economic lines, 97% say divisions come from political divisiveness, and 72% say religious lines. This chapter focuses

mainly on the way in which Americans see religious diversity, growth, and isolation within the United States.

The majority of religious Americans of all backgrounds believe that people of other religions can still go to heaven. That percentage lessens for Christians when the other religion in question is not another branch of Christianity, but hovers around 50%. 80% of Americans believe that there are basic truths in every religion, but 85% of Americans believe that “morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard.” This highlights the belief that Americans want government to stay out of religion and for it to be a primarily private matter.

Three main principles from the article are the Aunt Susan Principle, the My Friend Al Principle, and description of Social Capital. These help explain religious interaction and the ways in which they can become positively associated. The Aunt Susan principle operates under the idea that everyone has an “Aunt Susan” in their lives- someone who epitomizes goodness in your particular religion, but have a different religious background from your own. The My Friend Al Principle is similar in the way that it focuses on social interactions with individuals of a different religious group. In this case, two individuals find a common connection such as a love of sports, reading, or shopping, and then find that one individual is of a particular religious group. Because the two can relate in other realms, the religious group of the other individuals is believed to be not that bad or different. This is especially common with individuals practicing marginalized religions such as Islam, Mormonism, or Evangelical Christianity. Finally, Social Capital references the norms of trust and reciprocity that arise out of our social networks. According to Gordon Allport, everyone must ensure that all groups within society have equal status, share common goals, have intergroup connection, and the support of authorities and laws.

All three of these ideas hinge on the belief that a religiously diverse social network will lead to an overall more positive assessment of various religious groups, and therefore should be highly encouraged. This can not only be applied to religion, but the way in which Americans interact within individuals of different races, sexual orientations, and political parties.