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Political Research Quarterly 2008; 61; 704 originally published online Jul 31, 2008;

DOI: 10.1177/1065912908322408

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Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics

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Scholars tend to agree that American politics has become polarized along partisan and ideological lines, yet the causes of polarization are in much dispute. The author argues that polarization and the culture wars are a consequence, in part, of the changing nature of white identity after the civil rights movement. The transformation of whiteness from a form of social standing to a norm produced *ressentiment* among whites, which Republican strategists mobilized by depicting Democrats as the party of intellectual snobs and undeserving rabble and the GOP as the party of the virtuous middle. Normalizing this middle and the snobs as white polarized whites along partisan and ideological lines, creating an incentive to win votes by appealing to hot-button cultural issues such as welfare, abortion, and gay marriage.

Keywords: *whiteness; political polarization; culture wars; Spiro Agnew; resentment; virtuous middle*

The polarization of American politics is a hotly debated topic in political science. Scholars tend to agree that the American political system has become increasingly divided along partisan and ideological lines, as suggested by vitriolic presidential campaigns, the decline of bipartisanship in Congress, and the increasingly nasty tone of political discourse in the media and on the Internet. Scholars also agree that the parties have sorted themselves ideologically, with liberals now consistently voting for Democrats and conservatives consistently voting for Republicans. Yet there is little agreement regarding the causes of this polarization. This article explores the role that race plays in political polarization, or the tendency for politicians and voters to act along partisan and ideological lines. I argue that polarization has resulted, in part, from the changing nature of white identity, or whiteness, and the strategic response to this change by political elites. I further suggest that the transformation of whiteness and subsequent polarization lie at the roots of the “culture wars.”

During slavery and segregation, white identity functioned as a form of racialized *standing* that granted all whites a superior social status to all those who were not white, particularly African Americans. The loss of individualized standing due to the victories of the civil rights movement, however, led to anger, anxiety, and resentment among many whites, and a desire to restore that standing. This white *ressentiment*, as I call it, presented a political opportunity for

the minority party, if they could mobilize it. Yet given post-civil rights movement norms against overt racism, Republican strategists could not do so in a way that straightforwardly evoked white standing. They solved this problem by creating a narrative that portrayed the Democrats as the party of intellectual elites and undeserving rabble. The GOP, meanwhile, represented the “virtuous middle” squeezed in between. In constructing this conflict, Republican elites implicitly racialized both the virtuous middle and the “snobs” as white. By dividing the white electorate, they set the foundation for a polarized republic.

Prior to the 1960s, party identification among white voters tended to reflect regional, ethnic, and religious differences at least as much as ideological ones. But the aggressive effort to distinguish a virtuous middle from the snobs and the rabble contributed to splitting the white vote along ideological lines. In turn, increased ideological coherence created an incentive for each party to bundle positions on racial issues with hot-button “cultural issues” such as welfare, abortion, and gay marriage. This contributed to

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Author's Note: Thanks to Joe Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on earlier drafts and to Tom Brunell, Lyle Graham, Hahrie Han, and Fred Solop for helping me think through several points. Thanks also to Adria Mooney for research assistance.

a partisan realignment that made the base of each party more ideologically consistent and more antagonistic to the other party's ideology, paving the way for an increasingly polarized public susceptible to cultural wars.

To make this argument, I assemble the recent literature on polarization, partisan realignment, and the rise of the Republican Party to review the four most common explanations for political polarization: values, institutions, class, and race.¹ I argue that none sufficiently considers how changes in white identity might have influenced polarization. I then explain how whiteness has been transformed from a form of social standing to a *norm* and how this created *ressentiment*.² From there, I explain how *ressentiment* enabled political polarization. Through an interpretation of the speeches of Vice President Spiro Agnew, I show how President Nixon's team avoided overtly racist discourse yet still evoked the deep *ressentiment* felt by many whites at the loss of their racial standing by constructing a narrative of a "forgotten majority" squeezed between an elite of "impudent snobs" from above and a "constant carnival" of criminals and campus radicals from below. The purpose of constructing this virtuous middle was to split the white vote into two camps, (racial) liberals and (racial) conservatives, and to mobilize *ressentiment* to bring a majority of whites into the latter camp. Finally, through a critique of Morris Fiorina's (2006) *Culture War?* I show how the transformation of whiteness is part of the genealogy of the culture wars. Thus, the influence of whiteness on American politics continues to be felt even as the value of its "wages" declines.

This argument contributes to the polarization literature in four ways. First, it crosses subfields and disciplines to examine the relationship between race, polarization, and the culture wars. I weave literatures that rarely speak to one another—critical race theory, political theory, American political development, history, and empirical studies of polarization, voter choice, and party identification—to argue that changes in the nature of whiteness were an important contributor to the bundling of social and political attitudes along ideological and partisan lines. Second, I show that changes in the nature of white identity have been an important yet largely unacknowledged cause of polarization and culture war. Previous literature has shown that race was key to the recent rise of the Republican Party and that this realignment has led to polarization. I go further to suggest that changes in white identity created this opportunity for the GOP. Third, most accounts

of public opinion presume that mass opinion follows elite direction, but building on the work of Taeku Lee (2002), I argue that the source of polarization was racial conflict at the grass roots between ordinary whites and African Americans. Republican elites then mobilized the white *ressentiment* that this struggle produced. Thus, as Lowndes (2008) argued, the rise of the GOP was not due to a "white backlash," which presumes an automatic, almost natural white reaction to civil rights pressures. Nor was it due entirely to elite manipulations. Rather, it was due to a successful political strategy by GOP elites, which turned the raw material of *ressentiment* into a Republican realignment.

I do not wish to imply that the transformation of whiteness is the sole cause of polarization. Nevertheless, it is an important factor that the polarization literature has failed to fully attend to. Finally, then, my argument supports King and Smith's (2005) claim that racial orders and struggles over them have been central to American political development, even in areas in which their influence might not be readily apparent. Thus, "the question of what role race may be playing should always be part of political science inquiries" (p. 89).

Polarization in American Politics

The increased polarization of American politics over the past forty years has been widely recognized by academics. Congressional scholars concur that both houses have become more partisan and ideological in the past thirty years. The numbers of liberal Republicans, conservative Democrats, and moderates of either party have declined precipitously in that time, replaced by Democrats who tend to be liberal and Republicans who tend to be conservative (see Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Abramowitz and Stone 2006; Fleisher and Bond 2001, 2004; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 1984; Theriault 2006). Others go further to argue that party polarization reflects a broader polarization of public opinion. Kimball and Gross (2007), for example, maintained that party polarization is "accompanied by an 'us versus them' mentality [among the electorate], in which partisanship shapes the way people see the political world" (p. 267). Even if voters are not actually very far apart on many issues, they still tend to think of their own party or position as "good" and the other as "bad."³

There are four main explanations for the causes of political polarization. One blames values. In his

bestselling *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Thomas Frank (2004) argued that American politics is increasingly polarized because the American working class has been duped by elites to vote for "values" issues such as abortion, affirmative action, and gay marriage rather than their economic interests. Working-class Kansans, like other Americans, should be engaged in class war, but instead they seek culture war. "Happy captives," they cry out against gay marriage while nailing themselves to a cross of gold (p. 77). Frank's argument, however, fails to explain what has led the working class to abandon their interests for values. What has led them to drop the butter of the New Deal for the guns of the culture war? Frank insists that race has nothing to do with it, for Kansas and the Midwest "don't do racism" (p. 179). Yet the unacknowledged protagonist in Frank's drama is not all of the U.S. working class but the white working class (Bartels 2006). Why black and Latino voters are much less susceptible than whites to the false consciousness of values voting goes unexplained.

A second explanation regards how parties and legislatures have become polarized in response to the increased polarization of the electorate. Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning (2006), for example, maintained that Congress is more polarized because culture wars have divided the electorate, making "blue" districts bluer and "red" districts redder. As "powerful social forces" such as internal migration and ideological realignment make liberal districts more liberal and conservative districts more conservative, congressional districts become less competitive, enabling their representatives to become more ideological, and Congress becomes more polarized as a result. Fleisher and Bond (2004) argued that as electoral regions become more ideologically cohesive, moderates and "cross-pressured" members of Congress (i.e., those who are caught between a growing ideological chasm between their party at the national level and their constituents) get replaced by more ideologically consistent representatives through retirements, elections, or switching parties. Congresspersons were able to withstand these cross-pressures for about a generation, Han and Brady (2007) argued, which explains why the sorting of Congress was not complete until the 1990s or even 2000s, even though the process began in the 1960s. Yet like the values argument, the institutions explanation is implicitly about the white electorate, for black voters continue to consistently vote Democratic. This explanation still begs the question, then, why white voters specifically have become more polarized.⁴

A third explanation is that class drives polarization. Bartels (2006), for example, contended that low-income whites have not left the Democratic Party in droves, as Frank (2004) insisted. Rather, upper-income whites have switched to the GOP. Realignment, then, has more to do with economic interests and growing income disparities than values (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Unlike proponents of the values and institutions explanations, those of the class argument do acknowledge the influence of race on polarization, but they maintain that it is part of larger economic developments rather than a leading force itself:

Economic development [is] the dominant engine for partisan change in the postwar South and legal desegregation [is] the more complex and conditional secondary influence, with their interaction effectively dictating the story of partisan change once both were let loose on the Southern political landscape. (Shafer and Johnston 2006, 128)

Realignment politics, in other words, is less black versus white than rich versus poor. This argument admits that polarization is a largely white phenomenon, given that black voters overwhelmingly vote Democratic regardless of income, but it insists that the split in the white vote is prompted by economic interests rather than racial threat or backlash.

The problem with this explanation is that it is not at all clear that race is a secondary factor in polarization, even given the rapid economic transformation of the South. Numerous studies, for example, challenge claims that racial threat is not a significant factor in the rise of the GOP in the South and that poor whites are not shifting to the Republican Party (see, e.g., Black and Black 2007; Carter 2007; Giles and Hertz 1994; Schaller 2006). Furthermore, race and class mutually inform each other. For example, upwardly mobile whites' suburbanization and commitment to Republican policies have been prompted by racial fears (such as concerns over the desegregation of public schools) as well as economic interests (Lassiter 2007). Class is no doubt part of the story of the polarization of the white electorate, but the racial element to this drama must still be considered.

The fourth main explanation asserts that race was central to Republican realignment and polarization. In their pioneering work, Carmines and Stimson (1989) argued that by 1964, race had become the main constraining issue in American politics, providing the

glue that “bundled” attitudes on a variety of social and political issues into coherent liberal or conservative positions, encouraging ideological polarization. Edsall (1991) argued that race and taxes combined in the 1960s to create a “chain reaction” that broke up the New Deal coalition that was the base of the Democrats’ power, leading northern white ethnic voters and southern whites to abandon the Democrats for the Republicans. Numerous other texts have since examined the role of race in contemporary American politics, many of which I rely on here. This literature, however, has by and large not considered how changes in the nature of white identity may have motivated polarization. The question it poses is usually whether whites are still racist and, if so, whether racism caused polarization. But the key question is not so much whether white voters are motivated by racism. Rather, it is how white identity or “whiteness” has been transformed by the abolition of legal racial discrimination and how the American political system has responded to this change with regard to partisan realignment and ideological identification. What is needed, in other words, is an explanation of how the changing nature of whiteness transformed partisan attachments in the United States and how this contributed to polarization and the culture wars.

All four of these explanations for polarization tend to see it as an elite-driven phenomenon. That is, they assume that the polarization of the electorate is a consequence of the increased polarization of party elites (Hetherington 2001). But public opinion is not exclusively shaped by elites. As Gramsci (1971) argued, politics consists of the struggle between dominant and subordinate groups to achieve hegemony, or to define the ideological “common sense” of a society. Public opinion is thus not shaped only by elites but rather by elites’ struggle among themselves and with other political actors to win consent to their rule. As Lee (2002) demonstrated, this process was exemplified by the civil rights movement, which challenged elites’ hegemony at the grass roots. In turn, as the movement developed from the 1950s through the 1960s, Lee found that a “white reactive public” emerged in opposition to black insurgency. Conflict between these groups shaped public opinion regarding race, which party elites eventually responded to:

By the mid-1960s, both the Democratic and Republican Parties were keenly aware of the political salience of race as a result of movement activists’ successful mobilization and activation of public views of race. As a consequence, both

parties began to develop unambiguous positions on racial policies. (p. 54)

The purpose of developing these “unambiguous positions” is to construct a collective identity that at once associates one’s party with the civic ideals of the nation and identifies the opposing parties as marginal or even hostile to those ideals (Smith 1997). Party elites seek to equate their party with “the people” and cast opposing parties as unrepresentative of or unresponsive to the people. From the New Deal to the 1960s, the Democratic Party was clearly more successful than the GOP in identifying itself with the American people. But the grassroots struggle between the black freedom movements and a white reactive public created new opportunities to reshape public opinion. Political campaigns by Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and Richard Nixon took advantage of this opportunity by deftly mobilizing white anxieties in a way that broke up the association of the Democrats with the nation’s civic ideals. These anxieties emerged in the wake of the dramatic changes inaugurated by the civil rights movement. At the heart of this angst lies the decline of white standing.

From White Standing to White Normalization

One of the key functions of official policies and unofficial practices of racial oppression is to reduce class conflict among the dominant group. Under segregation, for example, dominant class actors insisted on control over racially subordinate groups and demanded that the state regulate their role in labor markets (Greenberg 1980). In particular, capitalists in primary industries such as mining and agriculture insisted on a repressive labor system structured by race, while white workers (especially unskilled ones) demanded that the state reserve certain areas of employment for them. Thus, despite conflicts between these class actors, “each call[ed] on the state to take control of the subordinate worker, to draw racial lines somewhere in the society and economy” (pp. 26-27). As W. E. B. Du Bois ([1935] 1992) showed in his classic *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880*, this implicit alliance between capitalists and white workers reduced class conflict. White labor repressed black labor in the workplace and the community and excluded the latter from full participation in the labor movement. In turn, elites granted white workers higher wages and sundry

“public and psychological wages,” such as the right to vote, to enjoy public accommodations, to live wherever one could afford, and the full benefits of American citizenship.

The American racial order, then, has historically been constituted by a *cross-class alliance* between capital and a section of the working class (Olson 2004). *White* is the term for members of this alliance. Such an alliance constrains conflict within the dominant “white” group because its operation demands the tacit consent of an overwhelming number of that group (Marx 1998; Mills 1997). Members of the not-white category, meanwhile, are relegated by the state and social custom to a status subordinate to that of any member of the white category. The most degraded member of the white group enjoys, in certain respects, a status higher than that of the most esteemed person excluded from it (Ignatiev 1995).

In this model, whiteness functions as a form of social status, or what I call *whiteness as standing*. As Shklar (1991) argued, the value of American citizenship historically has been that it provides citizens with a measure of dignity and status, or standing, that distinguishes them from noncitizens, particularly slaves. Prior to the civil rights movement, whiteness was a form of racialized standing that guaranteed public recognition of all whites through the legal or customary denial of standing to those who were not white. Whiteness as standing provided a glass floor below which the white citizen could see but never fall. No matter how poor, mean, or ignorant one might have been, or whatever discriminations on the basis of gender, class, religion, or ethnicity one may have been subjected to, one could always derive social esteem (and often draw on public resources) by asserting, “At least I’m not black.” American citizenship, Shklar noted, has thus simultaneously served as a mark of equality (among citizens) and distinction (between citizens and noncitizens). The value of whiteness as standing derives from this paradox.⁵

In the period between Reconstruction and the civil rights movement, both parties were central to the maintenance of white standing and the cross-class alliance. Composed of a coalition of southern white supremacists, urban ethnics, and white labor, the national Democratic Party protected segregation in the South to ensure its control of the region and the federal government (Katznelson 2005). The party was much more concerned with maintaining the coalition between white Southerners and Northerners than with appealing to its large African American constituency, who had come to the party en masse with the New

Deal. The national Republican Party, meanwhile, largely abandoned its newly enfranchised black constituency by the end of Reconstruction and paid scant attention to African Americans after that. By the time of the New Deal, its base consisted of northern economic elites and a moderate wing on the East Coast and in the Midwest (Rae 1989). Given that these constituencies were overwhelmingly white, the GOP had little incentive to address issues of racial justice. Both parties, in other words, consisted of coalitions of constituencies that presumed white standing. White standing constrained polarization between the parties and within them by giving working-class whites an interest in and expectation of favored treatment, as well as by protecting the racialized forms of labor repression that benefited elites in the South and North alike.

The New Deal is a good example of how the party coalitions preserved the cross-class alliance and white standing and thereby reduced polarization among whites. President Roosevelt and northern Democrats worked with southern Democrats to administer New Deal programs through a combination of national and local institutions that enabled southern Democrats to disproportionately distribute benefits to whites (Lieberman 1998). Providing too many benefits to African Americans, southern elites feared, would threaten their control over black labor. Republicans, for their part, were largely silent regarding the racial nature of the bills, concentrating instead on working with southern Democrats to oppose progressive labor legislation (Katznelson 2005). Organized labor also largely failed to challenge the racial nature of New Deal legislation, instead concentrating on winning benefits for their mostly northern members (Brown 1999). While helping many African Americans, the New Deal’s benefits went disproportionately to the white working class (Lieberman 1998). The New Deal thereby tamped down sectional and class conflict, reproduced the cross-class alliance between elites and white labor, and preserved white standing. It accommodated ideological diversity within the parties so long as the alliance and standing remained intact. The result was a lack of polarization between the parties and relative labor and sectional peace in the midst of awful racial turmoil in the first half of the twentieth century. A series of horrific racial clashes, including riots and lynchings, punctuated the American landscape even as the nation avoided the tumultuous conflicts between liberals, conservatives, socialists, and fascists that tore Europe apart (Klinkner 1999).

Yet racial orders tend to breed their own gravediggers. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s

emerged in opposition to segregation and white standing. By and large, it succeeded in destroying both. It was unable to entirely eliminate whiteness as a form of social power, however. Rather, the value and meaning of whiteness transformed from standing to *normalization*. That is, in the wake of the civil rights movement, whiteness went from a publicly recognized form of social status to a form of power that reproduces white advantage despite legal equality via norms that implicitly define white interests, assets, and aspirations as archetypal. Whiteness as norm is a system of tacit and concealed racial privileges that is reproduced less through overt forms of discrimination than through market forces, cultural habits, and other everyday practices that presume that white interests and expectations are the norm and that white advantage is the natural outcome of market forces and individual choices.⁶

In one sense, the distinction between standing and normalization is analytical, for whiteness was the norm of the pre-civil rights era as well. As Du Bois ([1940] 1995) noted, the basis of white power in the 1930s was not so much its official backing by the state as it was the fact that the white world's domination appeared as the normal condition of society to whites. Furthermore, residues of white standing persist after the civil rights era, including racial profiling, redlining, and "driving while black." Nevertheless, the distinction is significant because it captures a change in the role of the state in reproducing the racial order. White standing was reproduced through the explicit or tacit consent of local, state, and federal governments.⁷ White normalization is reproduced largely without state sanction, because the law now prohibits racial discrimination. This changed role of the state (and by extension the parties that compete to control it) produces a new contradiction in white identity. As normalization, whiteness continues to be a position of racial privilege in a democratic society. It remains an interest in and an expectation of favored treatment in a polity whose fundamental principle is that all men are created equal. Yet whites can no longer expect the state to ensure their personal standing. Racial privilege is no longer experienced as it was prior to the civil rights movement, when every white person personally enjoyed standing over every not-white. Rather, it is now enjoyed primarily at the group rather than individual level. Yet group advantages often do not seem like advantages at all. There is no guarantee, for example, that any individual white will personally benefit from the fact that whites as a group are statistically much less likely to go to prison or to

be victims of crime than other groups or that whites are statistically much more likely to go to college, buy a house, and be gainfully employed. As a result, white "advantages" do not seem as such even though whites continue to enjoy them.

This situation creates insecurity, as well as anger toward those perceived as responsible for it. Specifically, it produces *ressentiment*. The term is from Nietzsche ([1887] 1989), for whom it meant not simply resentment but a deep anger that smolders into the desire for revenge (Connolly 1995). White *ressentiment* reflects whites' "wounded attachment" to their lost racial standing and their latent desire for revenge against those responsible for that loss (Brown 1995). This tension between enduring racial privilege and *ressentiment* at the perceived loss of such privilege is the defining contradiction of white normalization. The irony is that normalization breeds *ressentiment* even as it perpetuates white advantage.

Ressentiment was evident in white public opinion during the civil rights era. From 1963 to 1968, a plurality or majority of whites thought that racial integration was going "too fast" (ranging from 41 percent in May 1963 to 58 percent in September 1966). Large majorities of whites were uncomfortable with civil rights demonstrations, saying that they actually hurt the advancement of Negro rights. Seventy-eight percent of whites in 1965 believed that communists were involved in civil rights demonstrations, indicating a fear that some sort of subversive element had infiltrated the nation. Majorities of whites in 1967 believed that Negroes had looser morals, less native intelligence, and less ambition and hated policemen more than whites.⁸ These opinions reveal a deep well of unease with the end of white standing. Furthermore, fears of going too fast, communist subversion, and loose morals suggest resentment against those who have caused this change.

White *ressentiment* did not automatically lead to polarization, however. The "white reactive public" resented the loss of its standing, but there was no necessary direction this resentment would go. It had to be mobilized:

White reaction against federal intervention, though intense, was not sufficiently widespread to immediately create a competitive Republican Party. . . . Southern Republicans needed national, state, and local leaders who could effectively market the party as a practical alternative for conservative and moderate whites. (Black and Black 2007, 82)

Ressentiment at most presented an opportunity to Republican elites. If they could effectively appeal to it, they could break the Democratic Party's grip on power that it had held since Roosevelt.

The concept of white *ressentiment*, then, presumes a condition of struggle between elites and the grass roots in the construction of public opinion. In this way, it is different from the notion of "white backlash," or the belief that the rise of the Republican Party and the end of the New Deal were caused by a reflexive reaction by white Americans against the "excesses" of black social movements. The notion of white backlash is specious, as Martin Luther King Jr. (1967) pointed out, because whites have always been ambivalent toward black struggles for progress. "The white backlash," King wrote, "is an expression of the same vacillations, the same search for rationalizations, the same lack of commitment that have always characterized white America on the question of race" (p. 68). Furthermore, as Lowndes (2008) pointed out, "backlash" presumes an air of inevitability that fails to explain what causes whites to see "claims for black equality in opposition to their political interest." Many whites resented the loss of their standing, but it was not inevitable that their *ressentiment* would lead them to the GOP. Indeed, each party had a mixed record on race and civil rights through the early 1960s. As late as 1962, voters tended to see neither party as more committed to civil rights than the other (Edsall 1991; Rae 1989). There was no reason why *ressentiment* would necessarily lead many working- and middle-class whites into an alliance with economic elites in the GOP rather than, say, a gradual if grudging recognition that they shared a set of common interests with black people.

The rise of the Right, then, was due at least in part to a successful strategy by GOP elites to mobilize white *ressentiment* at the grass roots in the service of a Republican resurgence. They did so by constructing a new constituency, the virtuous middle. Barry Goldwater and George Wallace were pioneers in the development of a polarizing virtuous middle, but Richard Nixon perfected it. One of Nixon's key architects was his vice president, Spiro Agnew.

Normalization and Polarization

Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign was the first to make use of the opportunity to mobilize white *ressentiment*. Goldwater made the anti-civil rights,

anticommunist, anti-welfare state perspective that conservative thinkers had been articulating since the 1950s a populist program by melding it with ordinary whites' fears of a world without standing (Perlstein 2001). Alabama governor George Wallace, who broke with the Democrats to become the presidential candidate of his own American Independent Party in 1968, spoke even more directly to the racial anxieties of whites (Carter 1995). His appeal was by no means limited to the South. Surprised initially by the level of support he received in the North (including 70,000 supporters at one rally in Boston), he came to remark with awe, "They're all Southern! The whole United States is Southern!" (quoted in Carter 1996, 6).

Ultimately, however, Goldwaters and Wallace's politics was too closely associated with racism to translate white *ressentiment* into political dominance. Their thinly veiled racial appeals and their staunch segregationist supporters represented the past too much to anticipate the future. It would be left to Richard Nixon to scrub clean the harder deposits of white racism and translate *ressentiment* into a new political program that did not obviously evoke the specter of race. Nixon's campaign strategists developed a plan to isolate the hardcore segregationists and win over moderates through a politics that played to white *ressentiment* without suggesting overt racism. As Carter (1996) put it, "The trick lay in sympathizing with and appealing to the fears of angry whites without appearing to become an extremist and driving away moderates" (p. 30).

At the center of this plan was a concept that Shklar (1991) called the virtuous middle. This notion, which dates to the Jacksonian era, presumes a virtuous citizenry constantly threatened by aristocratic elites from above and the rabble from below. Wallace, for example, extolled "middle America" and railed against "parasitic elites" and "subversive protesters" who acted in cahoots to overthrow the virtuous middle's values of God, family, and country and replace them with racial amalgamation, criminal disorder, legalized abortion, welfare, affirmative action, and general moral permissiveness. Nixon's team would refine this trope. Their most effective advocate was Vice President Spiro Agnew.

Nixon and Agnew's relationship was complex and not particularly friendly, but Agnew willingly served as Nixon's attack dog during the 1970 congressional elections, campaigning to win the Senate for the GOP by saying things about campus activism, crime, welfare, and intellectual elites that Nixon could not or

would not (Dent 1978). Agnew used the concept of the virtuous middle to appeal to white *ressentiment* without compromising Nixon's reputation as a racial moderate. He did so by normalizing the virtuous middle as white and by depicting it as besieged by an alliance of white liberal intellectual elites from above and a mob of campus radicals and criminal elements from below. In doing so, Agnew effectively divided white Americans into the virtuous and the permissive, the law-abiding and the disorderly. By mobilizing *ressentiment*, he split whites into ideological and partisan camps. This strategy contributed to polarization and, as I argue below, laid the foundation for culture war.

The bulk of Agnew's speeches from 1969 up to the November 1970 elections articulated a virtuous middle by constructing two enemies, the "impudent snobs" and the "continual carnival on the streets . . . and the campuses."⁹ The term *carnival* evokes a festival of indulgence by the lower orders of society, which Agnew used to illustrate his claim that crime, welfare, lawlessness, and "moral chaos" had grown dangerously under the previous administration, leading to a "nation in crisis" (Coyne 1972, 182). This constant carnival of criminal disorder had spread to college campuses, where "young adults hell-bent on 'non-negotiable' destruction" wreaked havoc on America's universities (p. 207). What passed for student activism was really just another form of criminality replete with theft, vandalism, and assault and battery. The permissiveness of the era, combined with the moral sanction given to civil disobedience by the civil rights movement (Agnew opposed the practice, saying it "leads inevitably to riots"), had created a new breed of campus radicals who demanded rights but refused to accept the responsibilities that accompany them.

While the carnival tugs on the virtuous middle from below, on top sits an "effete corps of impudent snobs" consisting of liberal intellectuals, the media, and the entertainment industry (Coyne 1972, 248). The liberal intelligentsia looked down at the masses and condescendingly deemed them ignorant and racist. Television news was run by a "small and unelected elite that is out of touch with the American mainstream" (p. 270). Popular music and movies assaulted youth with drug culture and a "creeping permissiveness" (p. 373). All of these joined campus radicals in a common mission, the spread of "radical-liberal ideas," and typically shared an upper-class background. Their condescension toward the "responsible citizens of this country," he explained, is "why [Agnew called] them snobs, for most of them disdain to mingle with the masses who work for a living" (p. 259).

However besieged, the "preponderant majority" of the nation rejected the hedonism, licentiousness, and drug-addled nature of the carnival. It persevered stoically under the tax burden imposed by the snobs. It revered decency and the law and recognized that with rights come responsibilities. The working men and women of the "New Majority" embodied patriotism, morality, and the work ethic, and they were increasingly coming to the Republican Party. Agnew encouraged this virtuous middle to draw a line between itself and both the carnival and the snobs. "I say it is time for a positive polarization," he proclaimed, based not on race, class, or age but on principles and values (Coyne 1972, 258).

Agnew was careful to never explicitly equate this virtuous middle with whiteness. Yet he, along with other Republican elites, used racially coded words and references to norm it as white (Mendelberg 2001). He was thereby able to give expression to white *ressentiment* without violating the new social norm of formal racial equality. For example, Agnew pandered to white southern history in an apology for senator and slave master Preston Brooks's vicious 1856 caning of antislavery senator Charles Sumner, as well as in his praise of Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson as "great Americans" at the dedication of the Stone Mountain Memorial in Georgia (Coyne 1972, 185, 330). Neither speech condoned slavery or segregation, but honoring these proslavery men warmly evoked the Confederate past and the era of white standing. In another speech, Agnew declared, "The forgotten American . . . does not enjoy being called a bigot for wanting his children to go to a public school in their own neighborhood" (p. 381). This antibusing comment clearly implied that the "forgotten American" was white. Even Agnew's care to distinguish the carnival from the black community implicitly coded the middle as white. He frequently noted that only a small portion of the young, the poor, and the black engaged in criminal activities; the "thoughtful" among them wanted nothing to do with the "relatively few weirdoes" engaged in the debauchery for which the radical-liberals made excuses (e.g., p. 288). Yet as Lowndes (2008) noted, the Nixon team's aim in making such distinctions was not to court black voters—neither Nixon nor Agnew campaigned in black communities, and neither met with black leaders—but to assure white voters that it was not racist to lash out against the crime, welfare, and permissiveness of the carnival.

In norming the virtuous middle as white, Agnew polarized the white electorate. He made frequent

attacks on the racism of the “eastern liberal establishment” to many a western and southern audience, in which he accused academia, the media, and the entertainment industry of hypocrisy for condemning southern racism while ignoring the racism within their own overwhelmingly white (and liberal) institutions (Coyne 1972, 255, 270, 396, *passim*). (This was doubtless a true criticism, but Agnew used it to distinguish these whites from the virtuous middle, not to attack racial discrimination.) He was always careful to depict some of the rabble as white, particularly student demonstrators, and often enough, he spoke favorably of African Americans, encouraging them to use the immigrant model of hard work and faith in the system to succeed (e.g., p. 183). Surely Agnew often had black people in mind when he attacked the rabble: he came to Nixon’s attention as a potential running mate because of his strident attacks on black nationalists while governor of Maryland. But for Agnew, it was participation in a culture of crime and indecency that determined whether one was of the rabble. Certain cultures may tend to breed delinquency more than others, but members of those cultures could choose to reject it. This shift in discourse from race to culture would prove useful to culture warriors in the next decade.

The polarizing of whites through the notion of a virtuous middle served partisan and ideological ends. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act under Lyndon Johnson, the Democrats had become the party of *racial liberalism*, an ideology that supports government policies to create and enforce racial equality. At first, the mantle of racial liberalism brought the Democrats increased support and seemed to fit with their image as the party of the ordinary man and woman (Edsall 1991). But as the GOP mobilized white *ressentiment* in the midst of the black power phase of the civil rights movement, and as politicians such as Agnew provided ways for white citizens to express their angst without appearing racist, racial liberalism became a polarizing ideology rather than a new zeitgeist. Its antithesis was the new ideology of *racial conservatism*, which accepted the principle of legal equality but opposed policies or programs designed to overcome the sedimented effects of racial discrimination.¹⁰

As racial liberalism became unambiguously attached to the Democrats and racial conservatism to the Republicans, the old coalitions that had made up the parties and produced ideological diversity within them crumbled. Dixiecrats left for the Republican Party, first at the national level and then at the state and local levels, wiping out the Democrats’ conservative faction. Many white working- and middle-class voters in

the North and Midwest (a group that would come to be called Reagan Democrats) followed suit, abandoning much of their attachment to the New Deal in the process. The rapidly growing and predominantly white “Sun Belt” went Republican as well. The north-eastern liberal wing of the Republican Party, meanwhile, disintegrated in the aftermath of the Goldwater campaign; the remnants of its base shifted Democratic. Recently enfranchised southern African Americans overwhelmingly voted their racial and class interests, which translated into Democratic support. This polarization was completed at the national level with the Nixon administration and was cemented by the entrance of the religious right into the GOP in the late 1970s, though it took another twenty years or so at the congressional level (Han and Brady 2007) and is still working itself out at the local level.

The transformation of the racial order and the changes it brought to white identity, then, were important factors in creating the new polarization. The parties became more ideologically cohesive at the national level, articulating opposing positions on issues such as crime, abortion, defense spending, and welfare; these differences stemmed from the founding conflict between racial liberalism and racial conservatism. This is evident, for example, in the Republican attack on Democrats for being the party of “big government,” by which they mean unfairly taxing the majority (i.e., the virtuous middle) to pay for programs that benefit a minority (the rabble). Of course, this argument dovetails with traditional Republican themes of low taxes and laissez-faire economic policies, but as Edsall (1991) argued, race cohered it into a populist rather than elitist attack: “Republican free-market principles performed double duty: opposing government intervention in private markets and, consequently, opposing programs that had the effect of distributing benefits disproportionately to blacks” (p. 62).

Republican elites, following the advice of Nixon advisor Kevin Phillips (1969), came to realize that not only did they not need African American votes, they positively did not want them, for whites would continue to defect to the GOP so long as the Democrats were associated with black interests. In the eyes of many whites, the Democratic Party became the party of and for black people. Yet it would be inaccurate to thereby label the modern GOP the white party, for the whiteness of the emerging Republican majority was not the same as that of the Dixiecrats. The latter’s power rested on racialized standing and the near unanimous support of white southerners. Nixon’s southern strategy, however, did

not seek to bring all whites into the GOP.¹¹ Given the end of segregation and official white standing, no party could hope to capture the entire white vote again (Lublin 2004). The Republican objective, rather, was to become the party of the virtuous middle. Its strategy was to split the white vote into ideological camps, voraciously attack (racial) liberalism, attach the Democrats to that discredited ideology, uphold (racial) conservatism, and win a majority of whites to it. Racial conservatism became the ideology of the virtuous middle, while racial liberalism was the ideology of white elites and a multicultural rabble. The irony of GOP strategy was that even as Republicans gave voice to white *ressentiment*, they did so by polarizing whites rather than driving all of them into one party or the other.¹²

None of this is to say that racial conservatism is morally evil and racial liberalism is morally good. Both reflect the normalization of whiteness. Racial conservatism simultaneously condemns deliberate racial discrimination, refuses to recognize the ways in which white advantage is sedimented into ordinary life, and dismisses those who make such arguments as racial extremists. Racial liberalism, on the defensive since the Nixon era, is caught between a commitment to genuine racial equality and a desperate desire to “win back” the white working class, while always assuming that these two goals exist in a zero-sum relationship (see, e.g., Gitlin 1995; Teixeira and Rogers 2000). The construction of these schizophrenic ideologies to mobilize white *ressentiment* is the signal contribution of GOP elites such as Agnew. Their success was to translate *ressentiment* at the grass roots into two ideological positions rather than one and to do so in a way that drew more whites to racial conservatism than racial liberalism. This contributed to making the parties more ideologically and politically polarized than they had been since Reconstruction. It instigated the culture wars as well.

Culture War and White Normalization

To suggest that the decline of white standing contributed to the culture wars is a claim fraught with danger, in part because the very existence of such wars is contested. The leading voice arguing that Americans are not deeply divided over social and moral issues is Morris Fiorina. Fiorina (2006) and his collaborators argued in *Culture War?* that there is no culture war in the United States. They saw no deep conflict over the moral foundations of the nation and no fundamental

disagreement about how morality applies to issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and the role of religion in politics. They did recognize a definite trend toward sorting in Congress and the electorate, in which the numbers of liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have declined, and most people who affiliate with a party now align with the party that is ideologically consistent with their beliefs. But sorting is not polarization or culture war. Indeed, Fiorina found that party and ideological allegiances are weak among the general public. American public opinion, he concluded, is “closely divided but not deeply divided.” There is “no battle for the soul of America” raging among ordinary Americans (p. 8). There is no culture war, only an increasingly nasty battle among the political class to control the levers of government.¹³

As one review has noted, *Culture War?* (Fiorina 2006) seems on its way to becoming canonical (Evans and Nunn 2005). Many of its findings are indeed persuasive. Nevertheless, there is a curious quality to the book, for it simultaneously scoffs at the notion of culture war even as it laments its existence. That is, Fiorina argued that although there is no culture war among “normal” Americans, one rages within the nation’s political class, which he defined as “the collection of officeholders, party and issue activists, interest group leaders, and political infotainers who constitute the public face of politics in contemporary America” (p. 16). Thus, the book is at once optimistic in asserting that fears of a divided red/blue nation are overblown and pessimistic that anything can be done to reign in the “purists” and “militants” of the political class who stoke the red/blue divide for their benefit.

Fiorina’s (2006) two minds stem from his assumption that public opinion typically follows elite opinion (p. 59). This led him to see the so-called culture wars as an elite-driven phenomenon promoted by “extremists” in the political class. For him, the parties and the pundits have become polarized while the American people remain “moderate, centrist, nuanced,” and not deeply divided (p. 127). Yet if public opinion is shaped by elites and if elites push culture war for their own gain, then Fiorina’s own logic suggests that the culture wars influence public opinion. As Graham (n.d.) argued, the culture wars serve as a “system of distractions” that elites use to organize coalitions, enforce party discipline, and silence independent voices. Thus, the culture wars shape American politics even if they are elite driven.

If elites shape public opinion, a culture war among them will inevitably trickle down to ordinary Americans. But as I have argued, public opinion is

not shaped only by elites but rather by struggles between elites and others to establish the political common sense of a society. In other words, struggle and conflict at the grass roots shape public opinion as well as elite machinations. This perspective eliminates the contradiction in Fiorina's (2006) logic, but it also makes the existence of a culture war more likely. Fiorina's assumption that elites determine public opinion led him to place "partisans" of grass-roots struggles within the political class. But grass-roots activists are not necessarily political elites, even if they are "well-informed," "have strong views," and "care a great deal" about politics compared with the bulk of Americans (p. 19). It would be hard to argue, for example, that black southerners who participated in the marches and sit-ins of the civil rights movement were part of the political class, or that the mass of antiabortion protesters today are. By defining them as part of the political class and placing them on par with politicians and pundits, Fiorina excluded them from the ranks of "normal" Americans. This preserves his claim that the culture wars are an elite phenomenon, but it led him to miss the significance of cultural conflicts at the grass roots in shaping public opinion. For even if only 10 percent of the nation is staunchly prochoice and another 10 percent is fervently prolife (p. 93), it is hard to describe this conflict as a "fringe dispute" strictly limited to the political class, or to deny its impact on attitudes toward abortion for the rest of the nation. Such conflicts shape public opinion and suggest a deeper and broader spread of the culture wars than Fiorina acknowledged. Recognition of the role of the grass roots in public opinion formation, then, challenges Fiorina's thesis that the culture wars do not exist except in the minds and stratagems of elites.

The genealogy of the present culture wars can be traced to the end of white standing and the mobilization of white *ressentiment* at the grass roots. George Wallace, for example, frequently used culture as a proxy for race. He associated African Americans with a culture of chronic unemployment, illegitimate children, poverty, crime, and welfare dependency and contrasted this with "traditional values" that extolled work, male-headed nuclear families, sexual restraint, law and order, and personal responsibility. For his part, Agnew portrayed the "forgotten American" as embodying the values of work, faith, family, and patriotism, which the snobs and the carnival disparaged. Out of these articulations of values came a set of debates (over welfare policy, crime, family, anticommunism, and abortion) that superficially appeared to

have nothing to do with race but in fact revolved around the perceived pathologies of the black poor and the implicit virtues of the normalized white middle (see, e.g., Gilens 1996). It should thus be no surprise that one of the writers of Agnew's "forgotten American" speeches, Pat Buchanan, would give the speech that declared the existence of a culture war at the 1992 Republican National Convention. Buchanan (1992) concluded that speech by saying that just as Army troops took back the streets "... block by block" in the midst of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, "so we must take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country." He did not mention race explicitly, but he did not have to, because "our culture" was normed as white. In such instances are the racial roots of the culture wars exposed.

This racialized notion of virtue furthered the polarization of (racially) liberal and (racially) conservative camps and gave a decided electoral edge to the latter. Competition for votes, combined with a taboo against explicitly racist appeals to race, encouraged Republican elites to articulate a constellation of "cultural issues," many of which implicitly refer to race, to strengthen their base and increase voter turnout, especially in closely divided campaigns. As Edsall (1991) wrote,

Race has crystallized and provided a focus for values conflicts, for cultural conflicts, and for interest conflicts—conflicts over subjects as diverse as social welfare spending, neighborhood schooling, the distribution of the tax burden, criminal violence, sexual conduct, family structure, political competition, and union membership. (p. 5)

Carter (1996) made a similar point when he argued that by the 1980s, the GOP had successfully portrayed the Democratic Party as "the party of blacks, of homosexuals, of the undeserving poor, of big-spending bureaucratic defenders of the welfare state, and of those unwilling to defend American interests abroad" and that "race seemed to be the glue that held it all together" (p. 80).

Current debates over "partial-birth abortion," stem cell research, and gay marriage are a generation removed from the issues that defined the culture wars of the 1980s and early 1990s. As the second post-civil rights generation matures, conflicts over values are less obviously racially coded, and combatants are no doubt sincerely motivated by nonracial reasons. Yet race is still prominent in conflicts over welfare, affirmative action, and immigration and even

factor into issues such as whether gay marriage is a “civil rights struggle” or whether it offends the legacy of the civil rights movement to describe it as such (e.g. Farrow n.d.). Furthermore, struggles over gay marriage or other issues result from neither an inevitable backlash nor elite manipulations but rather from elite attempts to mobilize the *ressentiment* or other collective reactions such issues produce at the grass roots. The goal of such mobilization is to associate one’s position with the virtuous middle and depict the opposing view as well outside “normal” American opinion. In today’s culture wars, the language is colorblind, the participants are earnest, and the conflicts are not necessarily fronts for race, but in content and form, the pedigree is apparent.

Conclusion

Profound shifts in politics rarely have a single cause. By itself, the transformation of whiteness from standing to normalization does not fully explain polarization and cultural conflict. Other factors are undoubtedly significant. There is a gender gap among white voters that is at least in part due to cultural issues (Kaufmann 2002). The struggle over abortion starting in the 1970s was a key culture conflict, for example, that was (and is) more about the role and rights of women than race. Also, changes within the parties that largely eliminated backroom politicking in favor of competitive primaries, grassroots fund-raising, and mobilization campaigns probably increased polarization. Growing class differences are undoubtedly significant, too. Furthermore, Americans have been subjected to numerous anxiety-inducing uncertainties besides changes in the racial order, such as downsizing and globalization. Nevertheless, the decline of white standing is a crucial part of a full explanation for the contemporary polarization of American politics. The upheaval of white identity and the *ressentiment* generated by it transformed the parties’ bases, which in turn reshaped the issues party elites stoked to mobilize voters, which in turn promoted polarization and culture war.

Historically, the U.S. state has sought to secure internal stability by creating an “other” within the nation that, through its subordination, serves to elevate the majority of the population. Such standing creates unity and coherence among the majority group. Absent a degraded other upon which standing rests, political turmoil among the dominant group tends to increase. In the face of such turmoil, the state could seek to restore unity by creating a new other,

which could be an external enemy (terrorists), an internal enemy (African Americans again), or an enemy that is both external and internal (Muslims, immigrants). But given the polarization produced by the transformation of whiteness from standing to normalization, these are unlikely. Rather, the future portends more conflict. This is not necessarily a bad thing, for conflict is the essence of democratic politics. Nevertheless, the persistence of ideological conflict may require that we abandon the dream of a bipartisan, unified America held dear by so many Americans. The great irony of the destruction of white standing is that it did not lead to King’s beloved community but rather to Gramsci’s war of position.

Notes

1. Partisan realignment is a “sharp and durable shift” in the majority of the electorate from one party to the other (Key 1955). Polarization is “a separation of politics into liberal and conservative camps” that implies the disappearance of the political middle and the association of liberals with Democrats and conservatives with Republicans (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006, 3). These are not necessarily the same phenomena. It is possible to have realignment without polarization: the 1928 elections created a durable Democratic majority for fifty years but did not lead to ideological polarization. The literature on recent developments in U.S. politics, however, tends to blur the distinction between them.

2. In this article, I treat standing, normalization, and *ressentiment* more as political and ideological concepts than as psychological ones. Although they certainly influence individual and collective mental states (and thus make for interesting study by political psychologists), I analyze whiteness as standing and as norm as a social-political status rather than an affect and *ressentiment* as a political phenomenon rather than an emotional one.

3. See also Jacobson (2007) and Wilson (2006). Others, such as Fiorina (2006), agree that elites are polarized but dismiss the notion that the public is. I return to Fiorina’s argument later.

4. Furthermore, these explanations only explain polarization in the House of Representatives. Other institutional explanations are similarly limited, such as the argument that partisan redistricting has caused polarization. See McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) for a critique.

5. White standing was not peculiar to the South. Few segregation laws existed in northern states, and racial practices varied there according to locale, yet informal practices and customs that privileged whites and subordinated African Americans were commonplace. Many northern school boards segregated their schools through the 1940s, typically at the insistence of white parents and often in defiance of state law (Douglas 2005). Residential segregation was more concentrated in northern cities than in southern ones (Massey and Denton 1993). Northern unions and/or shop practices often tacitly or explicitly preserved whites’ advantages regarding hiring, wages, and promotion opportunities, while “hate strikes” (in which white workers struck to oppose the hiring or upgrading of black workers to “white” jobs) occurred throughout the North through World War II (Goldfield 1997). Antiblack attitudes were common among white northerners, as

evidenced by their own comments (e.g., Terkel 1992) as well as anecdotes from African Americans (e.g., Baldwin 1962; X 1965). All of these practices, no less than Jim Crow in the South, provided whites with racialized standing.

6. Numerous scholars have noted this change from standing to normalization since the civil rights movement, using terms such as *racial hegemony* (Omi and Winant 1994), *laissez-faire racism* (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1996), *color-blind racism* (Bonilla-Silva 2001), and *the new racism* (Collins 2004) to describe the new racial order. I prefer *normalization* to these terms because it does a better job expressing that whiteness specifically functions as a standard as a standard by which resources, expectations, and behaviors are evaluated yet without categorically excluding not-whites from them. To say that whiteness is a norm, in other words, does not mean that people of color cannot achieve or even surpass the norm but that they are forever evaluated according to it.

7. Federal law did not consistently discriminate, but federal institutions generally acquiesced to southern insistence on segregation, at least until the desegregation of the military in 1948.

8. These numbers are taken from survey data compiled by Erskine (1967a, 1967b, 1968).

9. The speeches of Agnew that I analyze are collected in the appendix of Coyne (1972). According to Lippman (1972), Agnew wrote the first few speeches that attacked elites as snobs and defended a virtuous middle. After these speeches attracted media attention, Nixon instructed his own speechwriters, including Patrick Buchanan and William Safire, to write for Agnew. This indicates the significance of the virtuous middle argument for Nixon.

10. Or when it did support such policies, it was done with the intent to further polarize whites, such as Nixon's use of affirmative action to desegregate the construction industry (Lowndes 2008).

11. Furthermore, the GOP was not completely devoid of African Americans. As Dent (1978) noted, Nixon made more black appointments than Kennedy and Johnson combined, and unlike the Dixiecrats, southern GOP delegates typically included some African Americans. The presence of a few African Americans in the party, however, did not indicate a new spirit of inclusion but exemplified the distinction between Republican realignment via normalization and Dixiecrat domination via standing.

12. In the 1990s, the GOP finally began to reach out to black voters. As Dillard (2002) pointed out, however, current Republican efforts to attract a bloc of African American (rather than simply scattered individuals) are hampered by the party's rejection of identity politics and its reliance on a "model minority" archetype for black advancement. Furthermore, Fauntroy (2007) argued that the GOP continues to "forcefully advocate [public policy] positions that adversely affect African Americans" (p. 122). As a result, both concluded that there is little reason to expect the GOP to be successful in recruiting significant numbers of African Americans in the near future. Appeals to family values and religious rhetoric that worked to split the white vote, in other words, will not likely divide the black vote. GOP efforts to recruit Latinos have been much more vigorous but do not necessarily indicate a shift in strategy, given that party officials have often used Latino votes to undermine black voting strength (see Vaca 2004).

13. Other scholarship that does not find evidence of a polarized public includes that of DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996) and Evans (2003).

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