

# Partisan Moods: Polarization and the Dynamics of Mass Party Preferences

**Joseph Daniel Ura** Texas A&M University  
**Christopher R. Ellis** Bucknell University

*Inquiry into the origins of partisan polarization has generally treated polarization as a simple, symmetric phenomenon—the degree to which the worldviews of the mass Democratic and Republican parties have or have not diverged from one another. In this article, we disaggregate polarization into its constituent parts, the dynamic preferences of the mass Democratic and Republican Parties. This approach allows for the possibility that intraparty dynamics may influence interparty differences and for the integration of studies of polarization with literatures addressing other dynamics in aggregate public opinion. Building on individual-level research on partisan identities and macrolevel research on public mood, we argue that party polarization may be catalyzed, in part, by the mass parties' differential responsiveness to changes in the macro political-economic context. We find support for this position, showing asymmetries in the dynamics of polarization that are associated with differential partisan responsiveness to domestic policy choices.*

Mass partisan polarization is among the most important phenomena in American politics over the past 40 years and the object of a large and growing scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup> Although scholars disagree about the degree to which mass political parties in the United States have polarized and the consequences of this polarization for politics and policy, there is consensus that the political worldviews of the Democratic and Republican parties in the electorate have grown significantly farther apart from one another (see Hetherington 2009 and Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006 for reviews of this literature).

Despite substantial inquiry into the causes and consequences of polarization, however, most research has treated polarization as a simple, symmetric phenomenon—the degree to which the worldviews of the mass Democratic and Republican parties have or have not diverged from each other in some issue or ideological space. This approach creates two critical shortcomings for understanding what polarization is and what its consequences are. First, an emphasis on interparty difference ignores the role that intraparty opinion dynamics play in shaping party polarization, in

particular the possibility that polarization is driven more strongly by one parties' preferences than another's. Second, the treatment of "polarization" as a distinct concept, rather than a construction of changes in the preferences of each party considered separately, isolates the study of polarization from other literatures on the dynamics of aggregate public opinion.

This article addresses these limitations and sheds light on their substantive consequences by integrating the study of mass partisan polarization with research investigating the dynamics of aggregate policy sentiment (e.g., Durr 1993; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Drawing on microlevel research on partisanship and macrolevel research on the dynamics of public mood, we contribute a theoretical account of the dynamics of aggregate partisan opinion change that predicts partisan polarization as a function of dynamics in the macropolitical context. In turn, this leads us to assess party-level opinion dynamics to better understand how and why Republicans and Democrats have polarized as they have.

To analyze party-specific dynamics in aggregate public opinion, we use data from the General Social

<sup>1</sup>Data for replication and other supplementary materials are available at <http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jura>. The online appendix referenced in the text is available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/jop>.

Survey to generate a time-serial measure of macro policy sentiment which strongly corresponds to Stimson's (1999) policy mood index. We then disaggregate this measure into time series of Republican and Democratic (as well as independents') preferences. Consistent with prior research, we find growing divergence between Democratic and Republican preferences on this dimension. However, we also find that this general result obscures important nuances in the dynamics structure of party polarization. First, we find that the difference between the parties' moods has not been strictly increasing, but it, instead, shows periods of partisan convergence amidst the larger phenomenon of polarization. Secondly, we show that mass partisan polarization is *asymmetric*, driven primarily by dynamics in the Republican Party's policy sentiment that are not shared with Democrats or independents. Finally, we find that polarization can be viewed, at least to some extent, as a function of the parties' differential responsiveness to domestic policy choices. These patterns of differential responsiveness are generally consistent with what would be expected given well-known differences in values and priorities among Democratic and Republican identifiers. These results support a more sophisticated understanding of how and why the parties have polarized over the last four decades and suggest new pathways for the study of mass partisan polarization and the dynamics of macro public opinion more broadly defined.

## Reapproaching Partisan Polarization

There is considerable evidence of mass partisan polarization over the last four decades. At the individual level, links between partisanship and an array of attitudes and behaviors have strengthened substantially since the 1970s (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, 2008; Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001). In the aggregate, the political views expressed by Republicans and Democrats have become increasingly divergent on an array of policy issues (Brewer 2005; Layman and Carsey 2002). Though there remains much disagreement over the qualitative degree (big or small) and substantive importance (substantial or minimal) of partisan polarization and over whether party polarization is reflective of sharpening divisions along other lines of political difference (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Ansolabahere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008), even polarization minimalists concede

that the growing preference gap between the parties is a "significant development" (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005, 37).

Despite the important insights of existing research on mass partisan polarization, we see two related weaknesses in this literature related to the dynamic structure of mass opinion. First, scholarly discussions about aggregate mass party polarization focus primarily on interparty *differences*—the simple ideological or issue distance between positions of Democrats and Republicans. However, polarization is, by definition, a construction of two separate, dynamic variables: the policy preferences of the Democratic and Republican parties in the electorate. Viewing polarization as interparty difference alone reflects an implicit substantive assumption that polarization is a symmetric phenomenon, where both parties are simultaneously moving away from the center of some issue space at the same time. This need not be the case. The same degree of *growth* in interparty polarization is observationally consistent with a variety of changes in the *structure* of this interparty difference (Bullock 2009). One party may maintain relatively fixed preferences while the preferences of the other change dramatically. Both parties may move away from the center, but with one party moving more substantially than the other. Or, parties may move away from a fixed reference point at a relatively even pace.

Second, studies of partisan polarization have generally developed with limited theoretical connections to other literatures on mass opinion dynamics. In particular, there is much evidence that, in the aggregate, the mass public's preferences respond to changes in the state of the macroeconomy (e.g., Enns and Kellstedt 2008) as well as the ideological direction of spending and public policy (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Soroka and Wleizen 2010). Changes in the ideological distance between the two parties have, therefore, occurred against a backdrop of other important dynamics in the macropolitical-economy and public opinion. Yet, there is little consideration of how the dynamics of mass partisan polarization relate to the dynamics of mass responsiveness to economic conditions and policy changes.

## Aggregate and Subaggregate Opinion Dynamics

More than a half century of individual-level political behavior research has consistently concluded that the

ranks of well-informed, politically sophisticated Americans are sparse and that ordinary citizens are poorly equipped to handle the responsibilities of democratic citizenship (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Yet, scholars of macro-politics have also consistently found that changes in the aggregate distribution of political behaviors and attitudes over time correspond sensibly and systematically to political events, policy choices, and changes in the political-economic context (Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Kramer 1971; Page and Shapiro 1992; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

In particular, the thermostatic model (e.g., Wlezien 1995, 1996) of public opinion provides strong evidence that aggregate policy sentiment responds to changes in the political-economy by sending corrective signals to elected officials (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002, Johnson, Brace, and Arceneaux 2005; Kellstedt, Peterson, and Ramirez 2010; Wlezien 1995, 1996). In the thermostatic account, citizens use information to update beliefs about the policy environment and, subsequently, to send corrective signals to elected officials.

The model is motivated by a fairly basic view of how and why citizens respond to the political context as they do: responsiveness is driven by the degree to which citizens can detect whether policy is changing in a way that is broadly consistent with their preferred view of the world. In the thermostatic model, when the public “detects a departure” from its preferred policy, it produces a signal to adjust policy accordingly, and once sufficiently adjusted, the signal stops” (Wlezien 1995, 982). The result is that the public’s relative preferences for “more” or “less” policy adjust in response to changes in policy and the macroeconomy. This thermostatic model has been applied to explain both the dynamics of federal spending preferences and the dynamics of aggregate policy sentiment or public mood (see, e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Kelly and Enns 2010; Stevenson 2001; Stimson 1999).

The contrast between individual-level disorder and aggregate order has led to a growing body of research exploring “subaggregate” opinion dynamics. This research examines how particular groups of citizens in the electorate, stratified by some politically relevant variable, contribute to patterns of aggregate opinion change. For the most part, this work has concentrated on the roles of education, sophistication, and engagement in shaping public responsiveness and has challenged the conventional wisdom that aggregate opinion movements are driven by a small number of highly attentive, sophisticated citizens (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson

2002). Aggregate patterns of dynamic responsiveness to political and economic events are not significantly different across cleavages in education, income, voter status, and political knowledge (Ellis and Ura 2011; Ellis, Ura, and Robinson 2006; Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Page and Shapiro 1992; Ura and Ellis 2008; Wlezien and Soroka 2008). Taken as a whole, this literature supports the notion that the public is able to systematically update policy attitudes across divisions associated with access to information and the ability to process it. As a result, “parallelism” in public opinion movement is the norm rather than the exception.

## Partisanship and Issue Priorities

Evidence of this kind of parallelism in public opinion dynamics indicates that many citizens (even those with low levels of information or sophistication) are capable of detecting a departure from their preferred state of the world and signaling policymakers accordingly. But while information is an important part of the mass responsiveness story, it is not the whole story. In the mass public, political attachments and values can influence how individuals orient themselves toward politics and shape patterns of political attention and information processing.

In particular, because of its enormous importance in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to the political world, party identification is a line of political cleavage where we might expect differential responsiveness to the political and economic context. Partisanship is the crux of microlevel political cognition in American politics, the prism through which political information passes before emerging as observable behavior. Moreover, citizens typically connect their political identities, economic self-interest, and other salient attachments and considerations to applied political problems through partisanship (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960).

In addition, Republican and Democratic identities generally correspond to core sets of values and attitudes toward government that are central to understanding American politics (Franklin and Jackson 1983). Although there is substantial heterogeneity among individual partisans, Republicans and Democrats generally hold distinct sets of core political values.<sup>2</sup> Though the space of contemporary American political values, ideologies, and belief systems is

<sup>2</sup>Partisanship and values orientations are, therefore, related and reinforcing. However, there is some evidence that party identification is more enduring than core values (Goren 2005).

undoubtedly complex—embracing “freedom, equality, individualism, democracy, capitalism, and several others” (Feldman and Zaller 1992, 271)—for many Americans, the competing values of individualism and egalitarianism dominate their engagement with the political world (Feldman and Zaller 1992). Individualism connotes support for personal liberty and *laissez-faire* economic principles while egalitarianism includes equality and social welfare. Within this framework, Republicans predominantly hold the core value of individualism. In contrast, Democrats generally evidence commitments to both individualism and egalitarianism, creating ambivalence in their political cognition that is not present to the same extent among Republicans (Goren 2001).

Citizens with different partisan identities, especially as those identities are reinforced by value orientations, may react to the same objective information about the state of the world to different degrees. In particular, political or economic information that indicates a departure from a preferred state of the world for one mass party may have no such import for another. To the extent that these differences also manifest themselves in differential patterns of issue priorities, citizens with different priorities may be more likely to adjust their preferences in response to certain sorts of contextual factors as opposed to others. Democratic partisans—who, on average, emphasize both individualism and egalitarianism—are apt to see different problems (i.e., departures from a preferred world) in the same set of political facts as Republican partisans—who are, on average, attached to the value of individualism with fewer competing considerations.

As a result, we might expect that the dynamic policy preferences of Republicans should react more strongly than that of Democrats to perceived violations of the values of individualism. For Republicans, these policy choices and economic events have only a cost in the value domain of individualism without any offsetting gains in the value domain of egalitarianism. In contrast, violations of egalitarianism should be more problematic to Democrats. The resulting divergence in the extent of partisan responses to political and economic conditions may have implications for the dynamics of public preferences regarding the size and scope of government.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Democrats and Republicans also tend to come from different sociodemographic backgrounds. Republicans are, on average, richer, whiter, and more economically secure than are Democrats (e.g., Stonecash 2001). To the extent that wealthy and less wealthy citizens hold different political priorities, we expect class-based differences in political responsiveness to filter into patterns of partisan responsiveness as well. However, such differences in partisan responsiveness to political context are likely to reinforce the values-based differences discussed here.

## Partisan Moods

Connecting accounts of linkages between partisanship and values with models of thermostatic dynamics in aggregate public opinion leads to a new approach to understanding partisan polarization and the limits of parallelism in subaggregate opinion dynamics. Past research indicates that the dynamics of aggregate policy sentiment (or policy mood) are associated with economic conditions—in particular, *unemployment*, *inflation*, and *income inequality* (Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Kelly and Enns 2010), and public policy—in particular, *domestic and defense spending* (Kellstedt, Petersen, and Ramirez 2010; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien 1996). Differences in both the values and sociodemographic bases of the major parties, combined with what we know about the issue priorities of party leaders, suggests the potential for systematic differences in the extent to which Democrats and Republicans in the mass public respond to changes in the political and economic climate known to move aggregate policy sentiment, creating distinctive *partisan moods* and the potential for partisan polarization.

Extensive evidence of different policy priorities between Democratic and Republican governments (as well as similar differences in the policy priorities of liberal and conservative governments in other advanced democracies) provide guidance in developing expectations about specific ways in which Republican and Democratic partisan may evidence differential responsiveness to various political-economic dynamics in the context of policy mood. A long line of research, both in the American context and cross-nationally, suggests that “left” and “right” parties prize different economic outcomes broadly consistent with the political value structures discussed above. Liberal governments, in general, are more willing to trade off low levels of unemployment for high levels of inflation, while the reverse is true for conservative governments (Alesina and Sachs 1988; Chappell and Keech 1986; Hibbs 1977; Keech 1980; Tufte 1978). Republican governments also tend to produce higher levels of inequality than Democratic ones (e.g., Bartels 2008). Finally, Republicans tend to express higher levels of concern over the size of the domestic policy budget than do Democrats (Burden and Sanberg 2003).

With respect to economic conditions, we expect that Democrats will be more responsive to unemployment than Republicans since higher levels of unemployment more strongly offend egalitarian

sensibilities. Moreover, Democratic elites prioritize controlling unemployment as a matter of policy. We expect the same to be true for income inequality, given the obvious inegalitarian nature of growing income disparities. Conversely, we expect Republicans to be more responsive to inflation, as high levels of inflation distort market outcomes in a way that violates the value of individualism and is more important to the policy agendas of Republican elites.

With respect to policy, we expect that Republican preferences will be more responsive to domestic spending than Democrats since increases in the size of the domestic budget—and by extension, the reach of the federal government in redistributing wealth and solving social problems—violate the value of individualism (which is valued by Republicans and Democrats) to create greater egalitarianism (which is valued by Democrats alone). In contrast, we have mixed expectations about the parties' comparative responsiveness to spending on defense and national security. On one hand, Republicans often evidence a commitment to "physical security," which involves national defense that is common in right parties in industrialized democracies (e.g., Budge and Farlie 1983; Inglehart 1997). This predicts heightened Republican responsiveness to defense spending, though for reasons which are not related to the core value conflict in which we are immediately interested. On the other hand, defense and foreign policy occupy a unique position in American politics reflected by the maxim that "politics stops at the water's edge." This predicts that Republican should not be significantly more responsive to defense spending than Democrats. Given these contrasting points of view, we leave our expectations on defense spending open.

## Empirical Analysis

The expected differences in the associations of Republican and Democratic policy moods with important elements of the economic and policy environment lead to three complementary questions about the aggregate policy preferences of Republicans and Democrats. First, have partisan preferences, considered as policy mood, diverged over time, i.e., is there evidence that partisans' global orientations toward government have also polarized amidst other growing divisions between the mass parties? If so, has polarization been symmetrical, in the sense that both parties are moving apart from one another in a roughly equal fashion over time, or is one party's preferences contributing more strongly to polarization than the other's? Finally, to what extent do Democrats and

Republicans respond differently to contextual changes in the political and economic climate? The answers to these questions stand to shed light on how and why the mass parties have polarized and to evaluate potentially important links among the individual political psychology of values, mass partisan polarization, and the aggregate dynamics of policy mood.

Answering these questions requires, first, a measure of mass policy sentiment or policy mood. Stimson's (1999) mood index is perhaps the most commonly used measure of the ideological tenor of public opinion in empirical studies of mass opinion change and mass-elite linkages. Stimson's mood provides an overarching measure of preferences on the long-standing "liberal-conservative" conflict over the size and scope of the federal government (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Durr 1993; Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Kelly 2009; Smith 2000). This scope-of-government dimension, which encompasses traditional party conflicts over social welfare, spending, the role of the federal government in markets and domestic affairs, drives much of what government does in terms of policy outputs and spending decisions (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Stonecash 2001), and, by most accounts, still serves as the principal dividing line in American party politics (e.g., Ansolabahere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006; Bartels 2008).

However, Stimson's mood index is not directly applicable to the problem of understanding the dynamics of partisan policy sentiment, though it provides an important starting point for our analysis. Mood is derived from the marginals from hundreds of survey questions, from many survey houses, asked irregularly over time. It cannot be disaggregated into component parts of interest—in this case, into time series of partisan moods. However, the measure can serve as a benchmark against which to judge alternative measures of longitudinal public sentiment. A metric that correlates strongly with mood can be considered a valid measure of the underlying concept of "public policy sentiment" as commonly conceived, even if the measure is comprised of a far smaller battery of issues than mood itself. Thus, in order to assess the dynamics of Democratic and Republican preferences, we create a proxy for mood which captures the same dynamic shifts as mood, but that can be disaggregated in useful ways.

To obtain such a measure, we use data from the General Social Survey (GSS) to create a longitudinal measure of preferences on the scope-of-government dimension (see Ellis, Ura, and Ashley-Robinson 2006; Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Kellstedt, Peterson, and Ramirez 2010; Ura and Ellis 2008). In each survey year

from 1973 to 2008, the GSS asks a battery of questions related to preferences for government spending on a variety of issues (questions and coding in the online appendix).<sup>4</sup> Responses to each of these questions are coded for liberal-conservative content, with the most liberal answer receiving a score of “1,” and the most conservative receiving a score of “0.” Responses to these items are summed for each respondent, creating an individual-level measure of preferences for the preferred size and scope of the federal government. Taking the mean of the resulting individual scores within each survey year produces an aggregate measure of the public’s overall liberal-conservative policy sentiment. To aid in interpretation, we rescale the resulting 10-issue index to a 0–100 scale (with higher values indicating greater liberalism).<sup>5</sup> This aggregate policy liberalism indicator correlates with the Stimson’s index at 0.86. Both are therefore indicators of the same dimension of mass preferences.

This measure of mood preferences can be disaggregated into components of interest by averaging individual liberalism scores across subsets of the GSS sample. In this case, we generate partisan mood indicators for Independents, Republicans, and Democrats (treating “leaning” independents as partisans) by aggregating microlevel policy liberalism scores across the relevant subgroups of the sample for each year. The resulting series are illustrated in Figure 1.

Two observations are immediately evident. First, there is a persistent preference gap between Democrats and Republicans; Republicans are consistently more conservative than Democrats. Second, despite the difference in the parties’ relative levels of preference for policy, the two series have considerable shared variance over time, correlating at 0.73 ( $r^2 = 0.53$ ). In all of the series, we see the same basic shifts in preferences—a move toward conservatism in the period leading to the Reagan election, a movement toward the left afterward, increased conservatism in the Clinton years—that underlie much dynamic opinion

movement in the United States over the past four decades (e.g., Stimson 2004). That the basic dynamics of mood hold for both parties suggests that, to a large degree, each partisan group responds similarly to changes in the political and economic environment. To whatever extent polarization may be occurring, it is occurring against a backdrop of broad similarity in party-specific opinion movement.

### Party Polarization in Mood?

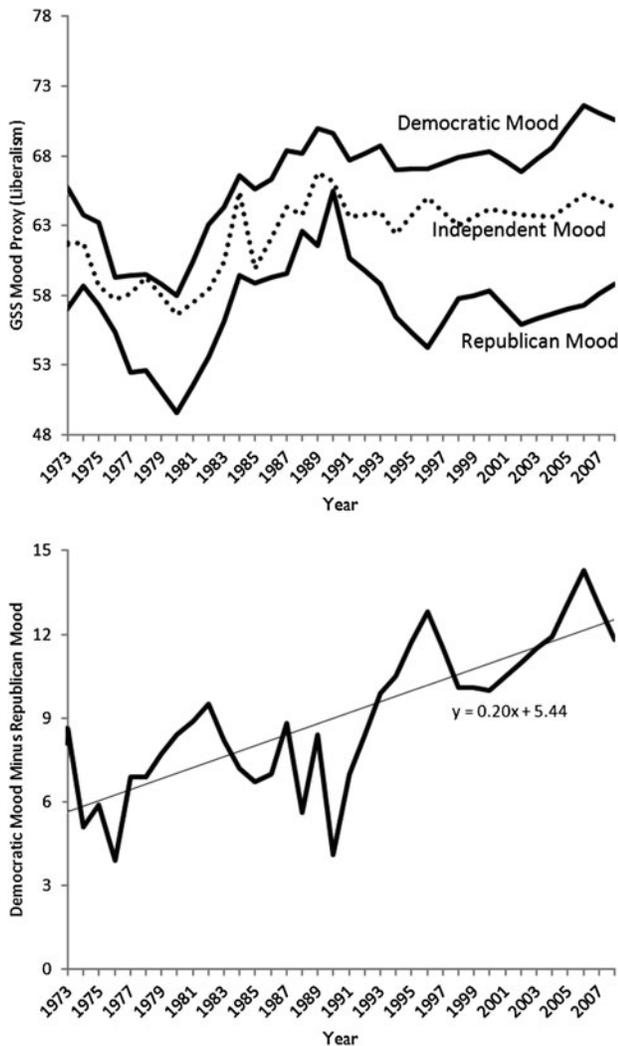
Despite the strong similarity we observe in the dynamics of Republican and Democratic moods, roughly half of the variance in the two series is not shared. Moreover, Democratic and Republican policy sentiments have generally moved away from one another in the past decade. The lower pane of Figure 1 shows the interparty preference difference (Democratic mood minus Republican mood) during the observed period. An OLS model of the difference between the party moods expressed as a function of an annual counter and a constant returns an estimated coefficient of 0.20 for the counter (with a standard error of 0.03). This simple temporal effect predicts a seven-point increase in interparty mood difference from 1973 to 2008. As a point of comparison, the observed range of the aggregate GSS mood proxy in the same period is 12 points.

The data thus provide evidence that the aggregate moods of Republicans and Democrats preferences have polarized since 1973. This result is important for our analysis, as it indicates at least some correspondence between the literature on public mood and the literature on mass partisan polarization. Parties are indeed polarizing on the mood preference space. This growth in partisan divergence, however, has not been monotonically positive. Though the last four decades can be generally characterized as a period of growing polarization, the dynamics of the interparty preference gap are more complicated than that. Instead, the series show distinct periods of both polarization and convergence. From the beginning of the time series in 1973 through 1976, Republicans and Democrats exhibited converging preferences. However, this move towards consensus ended near the end of the Carter administration, leading to a period of partisan divergence that peaked in 1980. Conversely, the 1980s were largely a period of depolarization; by 1990, the interparty difference reached its lowest level since 1976. During the early 1990s, polarization increased sharply, peaking in 1996. After a brief decline in the late 1990s, the 2000s have seen marked increases in polarization.

<sup>4</sup>Principal components factor analysis shows that 10 of the 11 spending questions asked in each survey year load on a single dominant factor, suggesting that they are all tapping broadly the same concept. The eleventh question, dealing with preferences for spending on space exploration, does not share common variance with the other 10 questions, and is excluded from the analysis.

<sup>5</sup>The GSS was not conducted in 1979, 1981, 1992 nor in odd-numbered years since 1993. Linear interpolation (LI), cubic spline interpolation (CSI), and multiple imputation (MI) via predictive mean matching of the missing values return imputed time series that are substantively identical to one another. The time series produced by LI and CSI correlate at 0.99, and those produced by LI and MI (averaging five imputations) correlate at 0.98. Given overwhelming the similarity of the resulting series, we use LI, the simplest of the three methods, in these analyses.

FIGURE 1 Partisan Moods and Partisan Polarization, 1973–2008



Source: General Social Survey Cumulative File.

### Asymmetry in Partisan Polarization?

We have observed significant but irregular polarization in the moods of Democratic and Republican partisans over the past 40 years. These changes in the differences between the mean positions of mass partisans—polarization with limited periods of convergence—can be conceived of as *deviations* from this parallelism. If periods of high polarization are more likely to be characterized by an exaggerated movement by one party relative to the dynamic political center, then we can see evidence that polarization has been asymmetric. The difficult part is defining the political “center,” since mass policy sentiment is relative and dynamic.

We employ the preferences of independents to measure the political center and to understand whether party polarization has been symmetric—with both

parties contributing roughly equally to interparty divergence—or asymmetric. The preferences of independents track closely ( $r=0.92$ ) with aggregate mood. Further, independents’ policy sentiment should simply react to the macrolevel context without any systematic partisan biases that may cause one party to become more or less liberal regardless of real changes in political and economic conditions. If both party’s preference dynamics correspond relatively equally to independents’, then we may conclude that polarization is a symmetric phenomenon, with Democrats and Republicans simultaneously growing farther apart, even as they respond in fundamentally similar ways to the political world. But if one party’s preferences correspond less closely to those of independents than the other, then we have at least suggestive evidence that the idiosyncratic party’s opinion dynamics contribute most heavily to aggregate polarization.

Table 1 presents the results of four models of independent mood predicted from the partisan mood series. The first and second columns report OLS estimates of independent mood predicted by its own first lag and contemporaneous values of Democratic and Republican mood, respectively. The third column reports estimates of a combined model, predicting independent mood from its own first lag, Democratic mood, and Republican mood. Finally, the fourth column presents estimates of a model of the first difference of independent mood expressed as a function of the first differences of both partisan mood series. This final model is useful for ensuring that inferences derived from the prior models are not the result of spurious relationships among the undifferenced partisan mood series. None of these models is meant to imply or assess causal relationships among the various mood series. They are merely a tool to identify asymmetry in the partisan polarization we observed above by assessing the extent to which each partisan mood series is related to the dynamics preferences of the political “center.”

Across the models, there is clear evidence that independent mood is more strongly related to Democratic mood than Republican mood. Comparing the results presented in the first two columns, we see that the coefficient for Democratic mood (0.65) is more than twice as large as that estimated for Republican mood (0.28). This difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ; two-tailed test). Moreover, the model of independent mood estimated from Democratic mood explains an additional 18% of the observed variance in the dependent time series than the model estimated with Republican mood. The relative strength of the association between Democratic and independent moods is

TABLE 1 Independent Mood as a Function of Partisan Moods

Predictor	DV: Independent Mood <sub>t</sub>			DV: $\Delta$ Independent Mood <sub>t</sub>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Independent Mood <sub>t-1</sub>	0.05 (0.12)	0.56* (0.14)	0.14 (0.13)	
Democratic Mood <sub>t</sub>	0.65* (0.09)		0.62* (0.10)	
Republican Mood <sub>t</sub>		0.28* (0.12)	0.08 (0.09)	
$\Delta$ Democratic Mood <sub>t-1</sub>				0.79* (0.26)
$\Delta$ Republican Mood <sub>t</sub>				0.08 (0.14)
Constant <sub>t</sub>	0.16* (0.04)	0.12* (0.06)	0.15* (0.04)	0.00 (0.00)
<b>Fit and Diagnostics</b>				
R <sup>2</sup>	0.85	0.67	0.86	0.41
Dickey-Fuller Test ( $\beta$ )	-0.91*	-1.00*	-0.93*	-1.35*
Breusch-Pagan Test ( $X^2$ )	0.00	0.25	0.11	0.77
Breusch-Godfrey LM Test ( $X^2$ )	0.35	0.00	0.47	4.30*

Note: Unless otherwise noted, cell entries are OLS regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses; Newey-West standard errors reported in column 4). \* $p \leq 0.05$  (one-tailed tests);  $N=35$ . Dickey-Fuller tests assess the null hypothesis of a unit root process in each model's residuals. Breusch-Pagan tests assess the null hypothesis of constant variance in each model's residuals. Breusch-Godfrey LM tests assess the null hypothesis of no serial correlation in each model's residuals.

also evident in the combined model reported in the third column. While Democratic mood remains a significant predictor of independent mood, the estimated association between Republican mood and independent mood is small and statistically insignificant.

The model estimates reported in the column 4 lead to the same conclusion: the association between Democratic mood and independent mood is stronger than the association between Republican mood and independent mood. Once again, changes in Democratic mood are significant predictors of changes in independent mood, while the first difference of Republican mood provides no significant additional explanatory power. Moreover, by differencing the series, we ensure that the substantive inference we derive from previous models is not merely artifacts of temporal dynamics in the raw time series.

Using independents as a proxy for the political center, we find evidence of asymmetry in the dynamics of partisan moods. Independent mood is more strongly associated with Democratic mood than Republican mood. (Indeed, the simple bivariate correlation between independent mood and Democratic mood is 0.92. Republican mood correlates with both the Democratic and independent mood series at 0.73.) This result suggests that convergence or divergence between the preferences of Republicans and Democrats is not the result of a symmetric change in partisan policy sentiment relative to a dynamic neutral point. Rather, this analysis indicates that Republican mood exhibits idiosyncratic behavior and, as a result, that partisan polarization may be thought of as an asymmetrical process. This result also helps to illustrate that conceiving of

polarization as a function of separate, related variables has considerable value in understanding changes in the structure of partisan polarization over time.

## Differential Partisan Responsiveness?

We now turn to an evaluation of the extent to which partisan differences in dynamic responsiveness to changes in national political-economic context can account for the asymmetry in mass polarization. We take a direct approach to the problem, estimating a standard model of aggregate mood for each of the two partisan mood series and then testing for parameter equality between the models. Specifically, we model Republican and Democratic moods as a function of federal domestic spending per capita, defense spending per capita, inflation, unemployment, and income inequality (see e.g., Durr 1993; Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson 2004).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Domestic spending is all federal spending, including Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, less outlays for defense, foreign aid, federal law enforcement (including homeland security), and debt service reported by the Policy Agendas Project (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). Defense spending is federal spending on defense subfunctions reported by the Policy Agendas Project (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). All spending data are in constant 2008 dollars. Inflation is the percentage change in the annual Consumer Price Index, and unemployment is the annual rate of unemployment (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009a, 2009b). Income inequality is the percentage of taxable income earned by the top 1% of wage earners (Piketty and Saez 2006).

We expect that higher levels of defense spending and inflation will be associated with lower levels of policy liberalism for both sets of partisans and that increased domestic spending and unemployment will predict increasing liberalism in both parties mood. However, as we discussed above, the association between core values and mass partisanship leads us to expect that Republican mood will respond more strongly to federal domestic spending and inflation than Democratic mood. In contrast, we expect that Democratic mood will respond more strongly to levels of unemployment and income inequality than Republican mood.<sup>7</sup>

We model the dynamic influence of these predictors for changes in the Democratic and Republican partisan mood series using a single-equation error correction model (ECM). The ECM is an alternative specification of the autoregressive distributed lag model and provides estimates of both the short- and long-term effects of independent variables on a

<sup>7</sup>Before proceeding, we note that this exercise places great demands on our data in several ways. The GSS preference data begin in 1973. This provides few observations for aggregate analysis. Additionally, the early 1970s is an unfortunate starting point for these data. Elite partisan polarization and income inequality both exhibit local minima in these years, trending upward afterward (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Likewise, real domestic and defense spending also increase generally (though more unevenly) throughout the subsequent period of time. These localized trends create collinearity problems for multivariate analysis of data derived from the time period we are able to observe.

These problems are unavoidable consequences of using GSS data. We can, however, check the robustness of our models by estimating two reduced form models of the partisan mood series in addition to the full models. The first predicts Republican and Democratic moods as functions of domestic and defense spending only. The second predicts mass partisan policy sentiment as functions of inflation, unemployment, and income inequality. This strategy separates the two most strongly correlated predictor time series, domestic spending and income inequality, providing a chance to observe the predicted effects of each separately to check for robustness. None of the estimates in the reduced form models are statistically distinguishable from those reported in the full model. Moreover, the full model outperforms either reduced form model for both Republican and Democratic moods in terms of the proportion of explained variance, predictive accuracy, and model selection statistics which balance explanatory power and parsimony (e.g., adjusted R<sup>2</sup> and Akaike Information Criterion). A report of these additional model estimates are available in the online appendix.

Even with these analytic safeguards, though, the limited number of observations and temporal structure of our data argue against overreading our model estimates. Instead, the models should be regarded as exploratory. They show us whether differences in the associations between each partisan mood series and various elements of the macro political-economic context are consistent with our claims, and they provide some guidance about whether polarization can be considered in part a function of differential responsiveness, and if so, which contextual factors are more or less likely suspects in explaining polarization.

dependent variable. The error-correction model is often used with integrated series, but is also appropriate for use with nonintegrated series as well (DeBoef and Keele 2008).

In the bivariate case, the error correction model takes the following form:

$$\Delta Y_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Y_{t-1} + \beta_1 \Delta X_t + \beta_2 \Delta X_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t.$$

Each independent variable has two parameter estimates associated with it. The first,  $\beta_1$ , represents the effects of a short-term change in a particular independent variable on changes in the dependent variable. If public policy were to move in a liberal direction, for example,  $\beta_1$  would capture the immediate effect of this liberal move on public opinion. This effect occurs entirely at a particular point in time and decays at the rate indicated by the error correction parameter.

The total long-run impact of a change in the independent variable on the dependent variable is a function of both  $\beta_2$  (the long run coefficient) and  $\alpha_1$  (the error-correction coefficient). This total long-run effect—the long-run multiplier—is distributed over time. The error correction coefficient is an estimate of how quickly total long-term effects accumulate. The ratio of  $\beta_2$  and  $\alpha_1$  indicates the total long-run effect of Y on X, which can also be estimated statistically by the Beweley transformation of the ECM (DeBoef and Keele 2008).

Table 2 reports seemingly unrelated regression estimates of error-correction models of Republican and Democratic policy moods as well as differences between the parameters of each predictor for the two partisan mood models. As a baseline, we see that both parties react in the expected direction to public policy, with increased defense spending moving both parties in a liberal direction, and increased domestic spending moving them both in a conservative direction. Similarly, we observe significant responsiveness to macroeconomic conditions in both mass parties. Republicans and Democrats both become more conservative in response to growing inflation and more liberal in response to growing income inequality. However, estimated responses to unemployment are insignificant for both parties. These model estimates generally recapture the principal empirical observations of the literature on the dynamics of mood (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Kellstedt, Peterson, and Ramirez 2010).

However, the primary issue for our analysis is not whether each party's responses to various political-economic conditions are different from zero, but

TABLE 2 Error Correction Models of Partisan Moods

	Republican	Democrat	Difference
<b>Long Run Multipliers</b>			
Domestic Spending $\$10B_{t-1}$	-0.28* (0.08)	-0.11* (0.02)	0.17*
Defense Spending $\$10B_{t-1}$	0.52* (0.15)	0.29* (0.05)	0.23
Inflation $_{t-1}$	-0.57* (0.28)	-0.47* (0.19)	0.10
Unemployment $_{t-1}$	-0.17 (0.83)	0.49 (0.37)	0.66
Top 1% Income Share $_{t-1}$	2.45* (0.94)	1.54* (0.27)	0.91
<b>Long Run Effects</b>			
Domestic Spending $\$10B_{t-1}$	-0.11* (0.02)	-0.07* (0.02)	0.04
Defense Spending $\$10B_{t-1}$	0.21* (0.05)	0.20* (0.06)	0.01
Inflation $_{t-1}$	-0.23* (0.12)	-0.33* (0.16)	0.10
Unemployment $_{t-1}$	-0.07 (0.33)	0.34 (0.24)	0.41
Top 1% Income Share $_{t-1}$	0.99* (0.34)	1.07* (0.28)	0.08
<b>Short Run Effects</b>			
$\Delta$ Domestic Spending $\$10B_t$	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.07* (0.04)	0.03
$\Delta$ Defense Spending $\$10B_t$	0.43* (0.09)	0.14* (0.07)	0.29*
$\Delta$ Inflation $_t$	-0.12 (0.19)	-0.03 (0.14)	0.09
$\Delta$ Unemployment $_t$	0.12 (0.29)	0.68* (0.41)	0.56
$\Delta$ Top 1% Income Share $_t$	1.03* (0.23)	0.76* (0.23)	0.27
<b>Error Correction and Constant</b>			
Error Correction (Partisan Mood $_{t-1}$ )	-0.40* (0.09)	-0.69* (0.17)	0.29
Constant $_t$	16.80* (6.81)	33.93* (5.49)	17.13
<b>Fit and Diagnostics</b>			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.59	0.59	
Dickey-Fuller Test ( $\beta$ )	-1.15*	-1.08*	
Breusch-Pagan Test ( $X^2$ )	0.01	0.40	
Breusch-Godfrey LM Test ( $X^2$ )	1.42	0.70	

Unless otherwise noted, cell entries are seemingly unrelated regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). \* $p \leq 0.05$  (one-tailed tests);  $N=35$ . Long-run multipliers (LRMs) are the ratio of each variable's long run parameter and the error correction parameter for each partisan mood series ( $\beta_i/\alpha_1$ ) with variance estimates computed using the formula for approximating the variance of the ratio of two coefficients reported by DeBoef and Keele (2008). The difference column reports the absolute difference between coefficient estimates for models of Republican and Democratic moods and indicates the results of two-tailed tests of the null hypothesis of no difference between the estimates (\* $p \leq 0.05$ ). Dickey-Fuller tests assess the null hypothesis of a unit root process in each model's residuals. Breusch-Pagan tests assess the null hypothesis of constant variance in each model's residuals. Breusch-Godfrey LM tests assess the null hypothesis of no serial correlation in each model's residuals.

whether the parties' responses to these conditions are different from one another. In particular, we focus on differences that emerge in the estimated long-run multipliers associated with the various predictors of changes in the partisan moods. These estimates reflect the total long-run (asymptotic) change in the respective mood indices associated with a unit change in a predictor variable. We are most interested in the long-run multiplier because the difference of each party's long-run multiplier for each independent variable indicates the equilibrium change in polarization (or convergence) we would expect to observe in the partisan mood series in response to a unit change in the predictor series. In contrast, short-run effects decay over time as a function of the error correction parameter (though they may represent politically salient disequilibria), and long-run

effects alone are misleading unless transformed into long-run multipliers in relation to the error correction parameter.

Comparative analysis of these estimated partisan responses to changing political-economic conditions yields some support for our comparative expectations regarding partisan values and heterogeneity in partisan preference dynamics. In terms of spending, the model predicts that Republican mood responds more strongly to the dynamics of both domestic spending and defense spending than Democratic mood. However, only one of these differences—that associated with partisan responses to domestic spending—is statistically distinguishable from zero ( $p=0.02$ ).

The long-run multiplier associated with an increase of ten billion dollars in federal spending is about two and a half times larger for Republican

mood (-0.28) than Democratic mood (-0.11). The long-run multiplier represents the association between changes in the political-economic context and the partisan mood series through an error correction process. For example, the model predicts Republican mood would begin to adjust to a ten billion dollar increase in federal domestic spending at time  $t$  during the next time period,  $t+1$ , at a rate indicated by the error correction parameter (-0.40) and to a degree indicated by the long-run multiplier (-0.28). In particular, the model predicts that Republican mood would decrease 0.11 points (the long-run effect) at  $t+1$ , which is 40% of the total long-run effect (which corresponds to the error correction parameter of -0.40). At  $t+2$ , the model predicts that Republican mood will realize 40% of the remaining adjustment (about 0.07 points). This pattern continues at each subsequent time point until the total long-run effect indicated by the long-run multiplier has accumulated. For Republicans, the estimated error correction parameter in the full model indicates a median lag length of two years and that 90% of the total long-run effect is in place by the fifth year after a change in variable predictor associated with significant long-run effect. For Democrats, the estimates rate of error correction is somewhat faster (-0.69). The model predicts that median lag length for Democrats is one year and that more than 90% of the total long-run effect of a change in a predictor is in place within two years.

Holding all else constant, a ten billion dollar increase in domestic spending is expected to polarize the parties by 0.17 points on the 100-point Mood index over the long run. However, domestic spending has increased roughly three trillion dollars in the observed period (about 307 tens of billions of dollars), predicting a much more substantial cumulative effect, approximately 52 points holding, all else constant. Though this point estimate should be taken with a grain of salt, this model indicates that increasing domestic spending has the potential to contribute substantially to party polarization. Both Democrats and Republicans respond to changes in domestic spending in the expected thermostatic way: by updating their preferences in a conservative direction. But because Republican preferences respond *more strongly* to domestic spending, this change in policy will drive the parties farther apart.

Estimates of partisan responses to defense spending reflect our contrasting theoretical predictions. The model indicates that Republican mood is more responsive to the dynamics of defense spending than Democratic mood. However, this difference is not

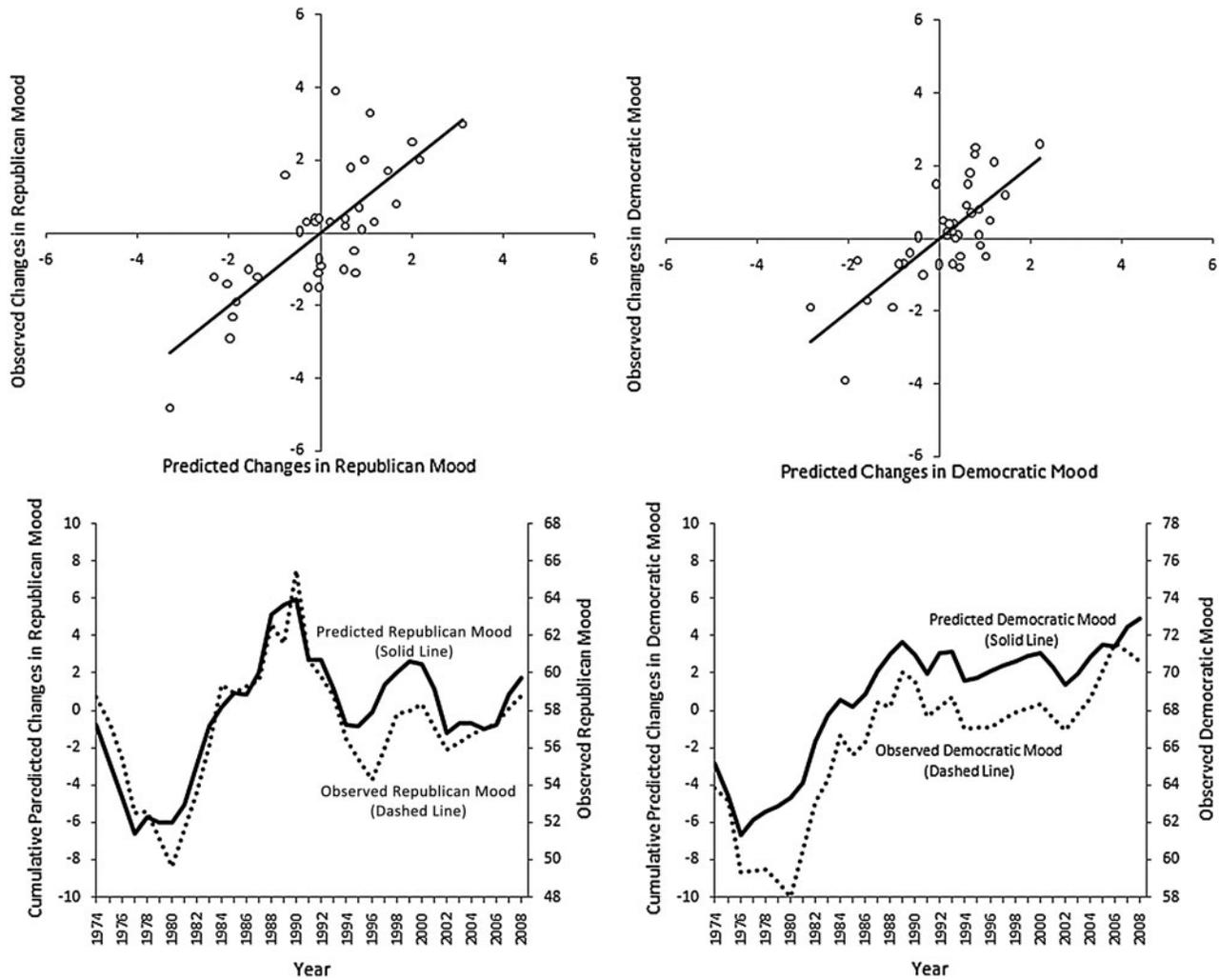
statistically distinguishable from zero ( $p=0.17$ ; two-tailed test). Taking the model estimates at face value, an increase of ten billion dollars in defense spending predicts a total long-run increase of 0.54 points in Republican mood and only 0.29 points in Democratic mood. This prediction implies that increased defense spending yields partisan convergence—both parties moving in a liberal direction, but Republicans moving to a greater degree, “catching up” with Democrats.

In contrast to differences in estimated partisan responses to policy, observed differences in patterns of partisan responsiveness to economic conditions are less consistent with expectations. Differences between the parties responses to inflation and unemployment are correctly signed, but neither are significantly different from zero. In the case of inflation, both Republicans and Democrats respond to increasing inflation by becoming more conservative, reducing their demands for government services and benefits over the long run. The Republican long-run multiplier is -0.57; the Democratic long-run multiplier is -0.47. The difference between the two estimates is substantively small, however, and not significant ( $p=0.39$ ).

Likewise, the model predicts that Democrats respond to rising unemployment by becoming more liberal over the long run than Republicans. Each point increase in the rate of unemployment predicts that Democratic mood increases by about half a point (0.49), while Republican mood falls by 0.17 point. However, neither party’s estimated total long-run response to changes in unemployment is significantly different than zero, nor are the estimates statistically distinguishable from one another ( $p=0.23$ ). Moreover, the estimated difference in the parties’ responses to the dynamics of inequality is incorrectly signed. Contrary to our expectations, the long-run multiplier of income inequality is larger for Republicans (2.44) than for Democrats (1.54). Once again, though, the difference between the two parties’ predicted responses to the state of the macroeconomy is not significant ( $p=0.72$ ).

These findings suggest an account of asymmetric partisan polarization resulting from differential responses to domestic policy choices amidst parallel partisan responses to macroeconomic conditions. These results are also consistent with our prior observation of increasing divergence and asymmetry in between the partisan mood series generated from GSS data. Indeed, the estimated models yield predicted changes in the partisan mood series that correspond strongly with observed changes in

FIGURE 2 Predicted and Observed Dynamics in Partisan Moods



partisan policy sentiment and which reconstruct the partisan mood series. The observed and predicted changes in the partisan mood series are shown in the upper panels of Figure 2; the cumulative predicted changes in the partisan mood series are plotted in the lower panels along with the actual partisan mood series. The strong fit between observed and predicted changes in the partisan mood series indicates that our model is a reasonable reflection of the political dynamics that have produced the observed divergence between Republican and Democratic policy sentiment.

### Conclusions

In this article, we have made a first step toward integrating two prominent bodies of research on the

aggregate distributions of political attitudes in the United States—the literature on mass partisan polarization and the literature on the thermostatic dynamics of policy mood. By disaggregating partisan polarization and focusing on the constituent preferences of Democrats and Republicans, we are able to evaluate theoretical connections between microlevel research on partisanship with macrolevel research on the dynamics of policy sentiment to produce novel empirical predictions about the comparative behavior of partisan moods. Using data from the GSS, we show that party polarization is a dynamic, asymmetric phenomenon, driven largely by the preferences of the Republican Party and explained, at least in part, by the differential responsiveness of the two parties to domestic policy choices. We find less support for our expectations that partisans are differentially responsive to macroeconomic conditions.

This set of results suggests more general conclusions about the nature and dynamics of the current period of mass partisan polarization, at least as it has been expressed in the mood preference space. First, our analysis emphasizes that the same *degree* of change in partisan polarization may be observationally equivalent with a variety of changes in the *structure* of interparty opinion differences. By focusing on the dynamics of Republican and Democratic preferences rather than the dynamics of the difference between them, this work offers a novel analytical perspective on the problem of mass partisan polarization that may provide a useful starting point for future extensions of theories of mass partisan divergence and convergence.

Second, though partisan moods exhibit distinguishable patterns of responsiveness to domestic spending, differences in average responses to changing economic conditions are substantively small and statistically insignificant. This suggests that the current period of partisan polarization has principally proceeded from differential partisan responses to *policy choices* rather than diverging responses to *policy problems*.

Third, it is important to keep in mind that *polarization* in partisan moods has occurred amidst substantial *parallelism* in the parties' responses to the macropolitical context. Indeed, more than half of the variance in the partisan mood series is shared. This indicates that partisan polarization may more generally emerge from one party's more rapid adjustment to an emerging state of the world or a new issue, rather than a more fundamental divergence in political worldviews. This pattern is evident in our data and conforms to patterns observed in particular issue domains. For example, Republicans and Democrats in the mass public have polarized over issues of gay rights since the 1970s; however, growing divergence in the mass parties' levels of expressed support for gay rights masks substantial increases in support for gay rights that have occurred in both parties (Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002). Partisan polarization is merely an artifact of a more rapid increase in pro-gay rights sentiment among Democrats than Republicans.

The concepts of partisan moods and of polarization as differential responsiveness can help to lay the groundwork for more nuanced studies of mass polarization and mass preference dynamics.<sup>8</sup> First, future research might

<sup>8</sup>Our models, for example, deal solely with aggregate party opinion. The dynamics we observe result from two separate microforces—existing partisans updating their own issue attitudes (Levendusky 2009) and citizens with stable issue attitudes switching parties (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998). Our analysis provides little basis to comment on the ongoing debate over whether polarization is largely a function of “sorting” or growing divergence between existing partisans.

explore the possibility that partisans react differently to policy or the macroeconomy depending on whether their own party is in control of government. In other words, partisans may gauge responses to changing policies or economic conditions differently if their own party is “responsible” for them. This speculation is seemingly consistent with the substantial evidence that partisans evaluate the economy and its prospects more positively when their party controls the presidency (e.g., Bartels 2000).

Our results also invite a more explicit consideration of the mass-elite linkages that shape the ways in which citizens receive and react to political information. We have focused primarily on political and contextual change here, implicitly neglecting the role that political elites might play in shaping polarization among partisans. Given the growing ability of partisans to self-select into media outlets that share their point of view (Iyengar and Hahn 2009), for example, the political information that citizens receive may itself be a critical driver of differences in party-specific opinion change—citizens of different parties may simply be reacting to different information. This argument might also be integrated with Hacker and Pierson's (2005) claim that elite-level polarization might have been asymmetrically driven by the Republican Party: if the ideological extremity of elite party cues are themselves asymmetric, it is natural to expect that mass parties would follow suit.

## Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the advice and assistance of Mike MacKuen, Jim Stimson, Heather Ondercin, and Nate Kelly, who provided valuable criticisms of earlier versions of this article.

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Joseph Daniel Ura is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77845.

Christopher R. Ellis is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA 17837.