

# The ideological nationalization of partisan subconstituencies in the American States

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**Abstract** Since the mid-twentieth century, elite political behavior in the United States has become much more nationalized. In Congress, for example, within-party geographic cleavages have declined, roll-call voting has become more one-dimensional, and Democrats and Republicans have diverged along this main dimension of national partisan conflict. The existing literature finds that citizens have only weakly and belatedly mimicked elite trends. We show, however, that a different picture emerges if we focus not on individual citizens, but on the aggregate characteristics of geographic constituencies. Using biennial estimates of the economic, racial, and social policy liberalism of the average Democrat and Republican in each state over the past six decades, we demonstrate a surprisingly close correspondence between mass and elite trends. Specifically, we find that: (1) ideological divergence between Democrats and Republicans has widened dramatically within each domain, just as it has in Congress; (2) ideological variation across senators' partisan subconstituencies is now explained almost completely by party rather than state, closely tracking trends in the Senate; and (3) economic, racial, and social liberalism have become highly correlated across partisan subconstituencies, just as they have across members of Congress. Overall, our findings contradict the reigning consensus that polarization in Congress has proceeded much more rapidly and extensively than polarization in the mass public.

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## 1 Introduction

One of the most important findings to emerge from Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal's joint research program is that the roll-call records of Democrats and Republicans in Congress, even those who represent the same constituency, diverge sharply from one another. Poole and Rosenthal (1984), for instance, show that Democratic and Republican senators from the same state vote very differently, suggesting that they represent extreme partisan subconstituencies rather than converging on the median voter in their state. In the three decades since that seminal article's publication, polarization in Congress has only increased, and the bulk of that polarization remains attributable to within-constituency differences between Democratic and Republican members. McCarty et al. (2009, p. 671), for example, demonstrate that over three-quarters of contemporary congressional polarization is attributable to "intradistrict divergence," and less than a quarter to "sorting" of Democratic and Republican members into ideologically congenial districts. Congressional politics, in short, has become much more nationalized, with members' roll call records overwhelmingly determined by their party affiliation rather than their geographic constituency.

Despite Poole and Rosenthal's suggestion that intradistrict divergence was rooted in senators' electoral constituencies, subsequent research has downplayed the mass public's role in spurring elite polarization. Most scholars have instead concluded that ordinary citizens have followed political elites rather than leading them. Summarizing the state of the literature, Layman et al. (2006, p. 90) note that nearly every study "on the growing ideological and policy differences between the parties in the electorate assumes that they have occurred in response to the increasing polarization of the parties in government." Most scholarship also has emphasized the limited and incomplete nature of mass polarization. Although opinion differences between Democrats and Republicans in the mass public clearly have widened over the past half-century, both globally and within issue domains (Layman and Carsey 2002; Levendusky 2009b), party still explains much less of the variation in the issue positions of citizens than of elites (Hill and Tausanovitch 2015).<sup>1</sup> In short, notwithstanding a few contrary voices (most notably Jacobson 2012), the dominant view is that partisan polarization in the mass public has both lagged behind and paled relative to polarization in Congress, and that little of elite polarization can be attributed to changes in the mass public.

Studies that compare members of Congress (MCs) with individual voters at the national level, however, arguably are using the wrong reference point. More relevant than individual voters, we contend, are the aggregate characteristics of MCs' electoral constituencies. The advantage of analyzing polarization at the level of the constituency rather than the nation is straightforward: senators and representatives are elected from states and districts, and partisan differences within those constituencies may not correspond to those at the

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<sup>1</sup> It is also debatable whether these differences are the result of true attitude polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) or the mere sorting of liberals and conservatives into the "correct" parties (Fiorina et al. 2005).

national level.<sup>2</sup> But just as important is focusing on aggregate rather than individual-level patterns. This is true for both theoretical and methodological reasons. As a theoretical matter, models of electoral competition generally predict that candidates' locations should depend not on the distribution of all voter ideal points, but rather on the central tendency (i.e., median or mean) of that distribution. In particular, in two-party systems where candidates must first be nominated in a party primary before contesting the general election, the ideological divergence between the candidates should be an increasing function of the distance between the mean or median voters in their partisan subconstituencies (Grofman 2004, pp. 28–30; cf. Fenno 1978; Clinton 2006). Focusing on aggregate quantities provides methodological advantages as well. Whereas individual citizens' issue attitudes are notoriously unstructured, unstable, and difficult to measure accurately, they appear much more coherent when mass publics are considered collectively (Converse 2000, pp. 348–350). For all of these reasons, we are likely to gain greater insight on the mass roots of congressional polarization if we compare it to the polarization of MCs' partisan subconstituencies rather than to the polarization of individual partisans.

Tracking ideological trends at the state (let alone district) level, however, poses formidable data-gathering and statistical challenges. The surveys with the most lengthy and consistent temporal coverage, most notably the American National Election Studies (ANES), employ cluster-sampling designs with relatively small total sample sizes, rendering them inadequate for subnational inference. Partly for that reason, longitudinal studies of ideological polarization in the mass public have either focused on the regional or national level (e.g., Fiorina et al. 2005; Levendusky 2009b; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015) or have relied on proxies for policy attitudes, such as ideological identification (Erikson et al. 2006).

To surmount the foregoing challenges, we rely on the combination of a wealth of new data and an ideological scaling model targeted directly at the objects of interest: partisan subconstituencies in each state. Specifically, we construct a comprehensive historical dataset of polls containing questions on both policy preferences and party identification. These survey data cover each year between 1946 and 2014 and contain over one million Americans' responses to 249 distinct policy questions on economic, racial, and social issues. To analyze this rich data source, we employ a dynamic group-level item-response model (Caughey and Warshaw 2015, 2018), which yields annual estimates of the economic, racial, and social liberalism of the average Democrat, Independent, and Republican in each state. Using these estimates, we examine mass-level trends in within-state partisan divergence, ideological nationalization, and correlations between issue domains and compare them to analogous trends in the Senate.

Our focus on state-level partisan subconstituencies rather than individual partisans provides a very different perspective on the relationship between elite and mass polarization. First, we find that partisan divergence in the mass public has grown greatly in all three issue domains. On economic issues, for example, the average within-state difference between partisan subconstituencies has risen fourfold since 1946—a much larger proportional increase than in the Senate. Second, using a scale-free measure to compare senators and their partisan subconstituencies directly, we find that senators and state-party publics have exhibited *ideological nationalization*. That is, in both arenas cross-state ideological variation within each party has declined precipitously, especially on racial and social

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<sup>2</sup> Lest this possibility seem merely hypothetical, consider the classic finding that for much of the twentieth century, Democratic states had more conservative policies than Republican States, despite the fact that within every state Democratic officials were more liberal (Erikson et al. 1989; Caughey et al. 2017).

issues, to the point where Republican and Democratic senators and publics from different states take very similar positions. Indeed, not only has ideological nationalization occurred in both the public and the Senate, but for each domain at each point in time, party has explained about the same proportion of variance across state-party publics as across senators. Third, we find that just as the “second dimension” of congressional ideology has declined in significance over the past half-century (Poole and Rosenthal 2007), so too has the liberalism of state-party publics become increasingly correlated across issue domains, so much so as to be almost as one-dimensional as in the Senate. In short, our focus on state-party publics reveals a tighter correspondence between mass and elite polarization than the existing literature suggests.

## 2 Intrastate divergence

In the classic one-dimensional Downsian model, in which voters with perfect information choose between the platforms of candidates motivated solely by electoral victory, both candidates converge on the position of the median voter (Downs 1957). As a consequence, the actual outcome of the election does not affect the ideological character of representation, for both candidates have (credibly) committed to implement the same policies. Thus, in that model, no intra-constituency divergence in representatives’ policy positions is predicted. Rather, ideological variation across elected officials is a function entirely of differences in the ideal points of median voters across constituencies.

From a great deal of work in political science and political economy, we know that the Downsian prediction of complete convergence is not a good description of the empirical reality in the U.S. Congress (Levitt 1996; Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Lee et al. 2004; Fowler and Hall 2016). One of the earliest and most compelling demonstrations of that fact was provided by Poole and Rosenthal (1984), who showed that pairs of U.S. senators from the same state but different parties exhibit large ideological differences in their voting patterns. This intrastate ideological divergence, they argued, was consistent with a model in which senators from different parties represented their respective partisan subconstituencies rather than the same median voter.

### 2.1 Senate ideal points

As Poole and Rosenthal’s subsequent research has shown, since the early 1980s partisan polarization in Congress has increased markedly, reaching heights that may be unprecedented in American history. A natural question to ask is whether intraconstituency divergence has widened as well. To investigate that question, we estimate trends in ideological differences between senators from the same state but different parties. To parallel our subsequent analyses of public opinion, we examine intrastate divergence separately for economic, social, and racial issues.<sup>3</sup> We estimate senators’ ideal points in each domain with a dynamic one-dimensional item-response theory (IRT) model, which allows legislator ideal points to evolve nonlinearly between congressional terms (Martin and Quinn 2002).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> We obtained Senate roll call data from [voteview.com](http://voteview.com) and assigned roll calls to issue domains using the issue codes provided by the Policy Agendas Project (Adler and Wilkerson 2017).

<sup>4</sup> We used the R package *MCMCpack* (Martin et al. 2011) to estimate the ideal points. To reduce computation time, we sampled 100 economic roll call votes in each congress. For the social and racial ideal points,

For the economic domain, we estimate senators' ideal points in each congressional term between the 81th (1949–1950) and 113th (2013–2013). Because few roll call on social and race issues were voted on until the late 1950s, our estimates for these domains start in the 85th Congress (1957–1958). The ideal point estimates are coded so that larger scores are conservative and are standardized to have zero mean and unit variance across senator-congresses. Finally, for each term, we calculated the ideal-point differences between senators from the same state but different parties, and then we averaged the domain-specific differences within each term.

The resulting domain-specific estimates of intrastate ideological divergence in the Senate are plotted in the top panel of Fig. 1.<sup>5</sup> Consider first the trend in the economic domain, indicated by the solid line. Consistent with Poole and Rosenthal (1984), who examined the years 1959–1980, same-state senators from different parties have taken highly divergent positions on economic issues throughout the postwar era. Even at its low point in the late 1970s, the average mixed-party Senate pair differed in their economic conservatism by at least one standard deviation. Since 1980, intrastate divergence on economic issues has approximately doubled and is currently as high as it has ever been.<sup>6</sup>

Intrastate divergence on social and racial issues has increased to nearly the same height, but from a much lower starting point. In the late 1950s, when social and racial roll calls became frequent enough to estimate ideal points, the typical mixed-party Senate pair differed by only half a standard deviation on those issues. By the 1970s, however, intrastate divergence on social and racial issues had converged with divergence on economics, and the three domains subsequently trended in tandem with one another. By the twenty-first century, Republican senators were typically 1.5–2 standard deviations more economically, socially, and racially conservative than Democratic senators from their same state.

## 2.2 Mass issue positions

Have similar developments occurred in the mass public? That question is difficult to answer because of the lack of an existing time-series measure of within-state ideological

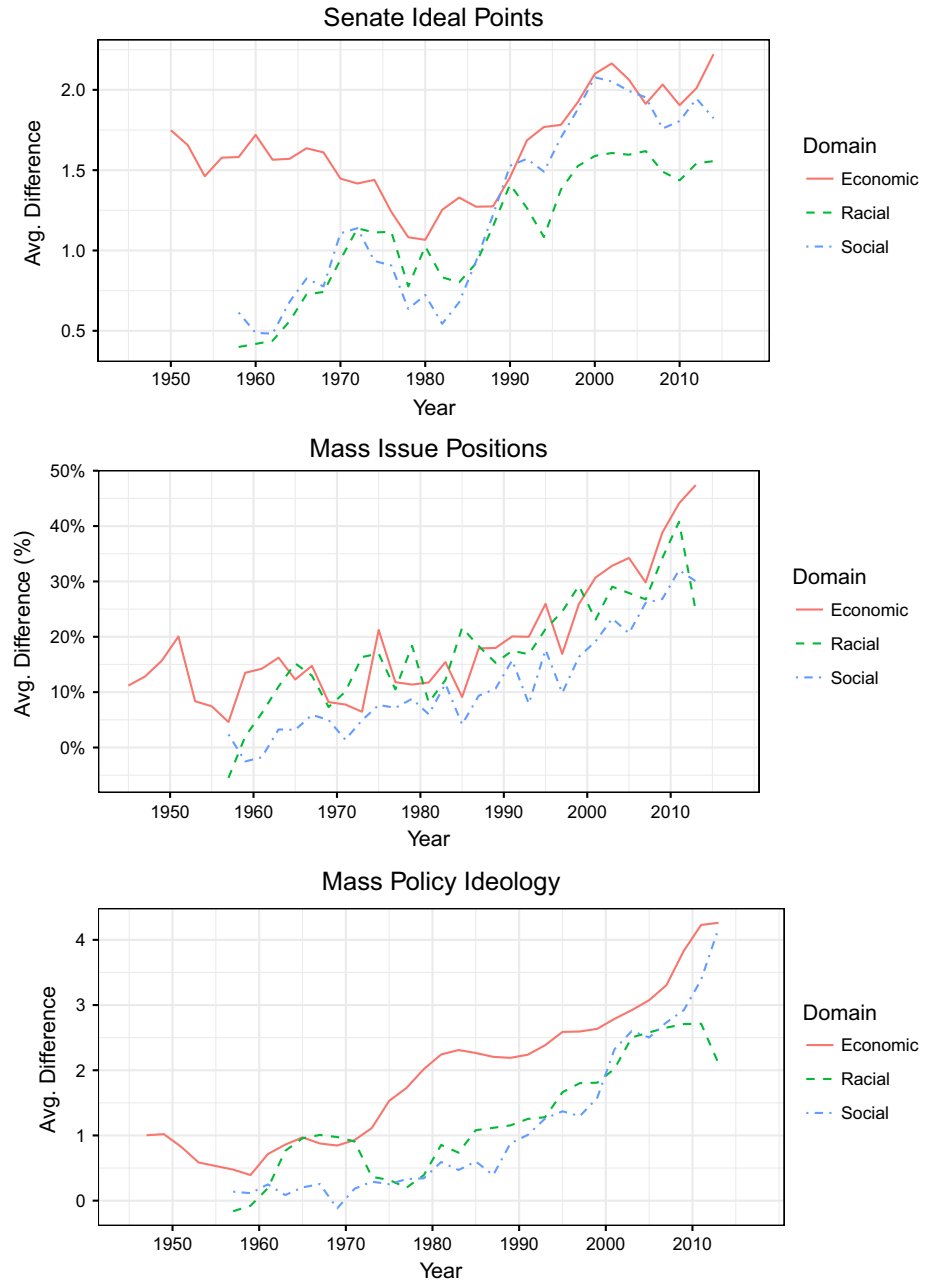
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Footnote 4 (continued)

we used all available roll calls (which always number fewer than 100 per congress). For a discussion of how dynamic IRT estimates differ from DW-NOMINATE scores, see Caughey and Schickler (2016).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the estimates of intrastate ideological divergence in the Senate plotted in the top panel of Fig. 1 are based on split-party delegations. However, the mix of states with split party delegations has fluctuated over time (Brunell and Grofman 2018). Thus, some of the flux in intrastate ideological divergence in the Senate in Fig. 1 could be due to changes in the mix of states with split-party delegations. We have used two approaches to assess how much changes in the mix of split party delegations affect our analysis in Fig. 1. First, we have replicated the analysis in Fig. 1 separately for Southern and non-Southern states. We find similar patterns across regions, which suggests that changes in the regional mix of split party delegations only have a small effect on our estimates of partisan polarization in the Senate. Second, we have replicated the analysis of the Senate in Fig. 1 using a model that includes fixed effects for each state. This analysis purges the effect of changes in the mix of states with split party delegations by isolating the *within-state* trends in divergence. This analysis too shows very similar patterns as in Fig. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Trends in intrastate divergence as measured by first-dimension DW-NOMINATE scores look similar to those as measured by our economic ideal points. In particular, according to both measures intrastate divergence in the contemporary Congress is about two standard deviations. This makes sense since the primary content of the first dimension has historically been economic issues (Poole and Rosenthal 2007). The main difference between the two series is that according to DW-NOMINATE, the post-1960 decline in intrastate divergence persisted longer, and the subsequent increase occurred later and less gradually than our economic ideal points imply.



**Fig. 1** Intrastate partisan divergence in Senate ideal points (top), mass issue positions (middle), and mass policy ideology (bottom)

differences between Democrats and Republicans. The first step in constructing such a measure is developing a comprehensive historical dataset of the domestic policy attitudes of Democratic and Republican identifiers. We constructed such a dataset, which includes

nearly every policy question ever asked in a U.S. face-to-face or telephone survey that also included a party identification question.<sup>7</sup> The dataset includes canonical academic surveys, such as the ANES and the General Social Survey (GSS), but it also includes hundreds of polls from commercial polling organizations such as Gallup, CBS News/NYTimes, ABC News/Washington Post, Time Magazine, Pew, and many others. In total, the dataset contains over a million Americans' responses to 249 distinct survey questions, with a minimum of at least a thousand survey responses in each year between 1946 and 2014.

With these data in hand, the next question is how to analyze them. As a simple first cut, we calculated, for each question-term pair, the difference between the proportions of Democrats and Republicans who chose the conservative response option for that question.<sup>8</sup> For example, if a respondent expressed greater agreement with the statement “we need a strong government to handle today’s complex economic problems” than with “the free market can handle these problems without government being involved”, this response was coded as liberal (and vice versa if the preference was reversed). Then, within each term, we averaged the values of the question-specific partisan differences. We did this separately for questions pertaining to economic (e.g., social welfare and labor regulation), social (e.g., gun control and school prayer), and racial (e.g., desegregation and affirmative action) issues. We distinguished between these three domains because, as we show in Sect. 4, economic, social, and racial conservatism were much less correlated in the mid-twentieth century than they are today (see also Caughey and Warshaw 2018). The result is a measure of how much Democrats and Republicans in the same state differed in their responses to individual survey questions in each domain.

The middle panel of Fig. 1 plots domain-specific trends in this measure of intrastate divergence. Economic, social, and racial issues track each other more closely on this measure than they do in the Senate, especially after 1960. Intrastate differences on economic and racial issues averaged 10–15 percentage points between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s, after which they rose sharply. Partisan differences on social issues have been about 5–10 points smaller than on economic and racial issues, but they too have increased dramatically. By 2010, same-state Democrats and Republicans differed in their support for conservative policy positions by at least 30 points on all three domains.

It is worth noting that the superficial correspondence among the three domains conceals important regional differences. As far back as our data extend, Republican identifiers have always been more economically conservative on average than same-state Democrats. This was true even in Southern states, though in the 1950s the differences were quite small. On racial issues, by contrast, this was true only outside the South (see Schickler 2013). In Southern states, Republicans generally expressed more liberal racial attitudes than same-state Democrats. Finally, on social issues there were few consistent partisan differences in either direction until the late 1960s in non-Southern states and until the late 1970s in Southern ones. In short, it was not until several decades into this period that attitudes on all racial and social issues were positively correlated with partisanship within each state. Only

<sup>7</sup> Our preliminary analysis indicates that online surveys, such as the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies, show more polarization and sorting than phone surveys. Thus, we omit online surveys in order to ensure the inter-temporal comparability of our results.

<sup>8</sup> We coded the polarity of questions based on the substantive valence of the question. For example, for economic questions we examined which response option implied a larger scope and size of government. We generally dichotomized multichotomous questions around the middle category.

after all issues were ideologically aligned with partisanship were increases in intrastate divergence driven solely by widening partisan gaps on individual issues.

Although raw opinion differences have the advantage of simplicity and transparency, they are an imperfect metric for examining ideological change over time. As Poole and Rosenthal (1984, p. 1063) themselves note, unadjusted percentages are sensitive not only to ideological differences between individuals but also to the ideological content of the survey questions. It is therefore conceivable that the apparent trends in ideological divergence portrayed Fig. 1's middle panel were driven not by true ideological shifts, but rather by changes in the kinds of questions asked over time. Thus, just as Poole and Rosenthal (1985) developed NOMINATE as a method for scaling legislators' ideologies independent of the congressional agenda, we too turn to ideal-point modeling as a means of estimating mass conservatism comparably across time.

### 2.3 Mass policy ideology

The use of scaling methods to estimate survey respondents' latent ideology, to which Poole (1998) was a key contributor, has burgeoned in recent years, with much of the most recent work employing an item-response theory (IRT) framework (e.g., Treier and Hillygus 2009; Jessee 2009; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013). Extending those methods historically, however, presents substantial challenges because IRT models typically require many items per respondent. Until recently, however, very few surveys—primarily academic ones like the ANES—included more than a handful of policy questions, let alone multiple questions in different issue domains. Given these surveys' small sample sizes and uneven subnational coverage, studies such as Hill and Tausanovitch (2015) that seek to scale respondents comparably across time have been forced to focus on national or regional quantities of interest. Applying other scaling methods to the much richer—but also much sparser—survey dataset described above requires an alternative to the conventional individual-level IRT model.

The alternative we employ is a group-level IRT model, as developed by Caughey and Warshaw (2015) and implemented by the R package `dgo` (Dunham et al. 2016). Unlike conventional IRT models, which derive aggregate quantities from individual-level ideal points, a group-level IRT model estimates those quantities directly, marginalizing over the distribution of individual ideal points. Specifically, the target of inference in a group-level IRT model is the *average* score on a latent trait in each subpopulation. Because the model does not estimate individual ideal points, it does not require many items per individual, but rather many items per group, which may be spread across multiple polls. In our case, we estimated the average domain-specific conservatism of groups defined by the cross-classification of state and party identification. We also employed a dynamic version of the model that improved the accuracy of period-specific estimates by pooling information across time with Bayesian priors. We allowed the item difficulties (i.e., intercepts) of questions asked across multiple years to evolve over time, but to aid comparability we constrained the discrimination parameters of consistent question series to be constant across periods (for more details, see online appendix A). We also standardized estimates to be mean zero and unit variance across state-party-biennia.

This model yields estimates of the average economic, social, and racial conservatism of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans in each 2-year congressional term. The estimates for economic conservatism cover terms between 1947–1948 and 2013–2014, and the ones for social and racial conservatism cover 1957–1958 to 2013–2014. To estimate intrastate divergence from those estimates, we again calculate within-state differences in the

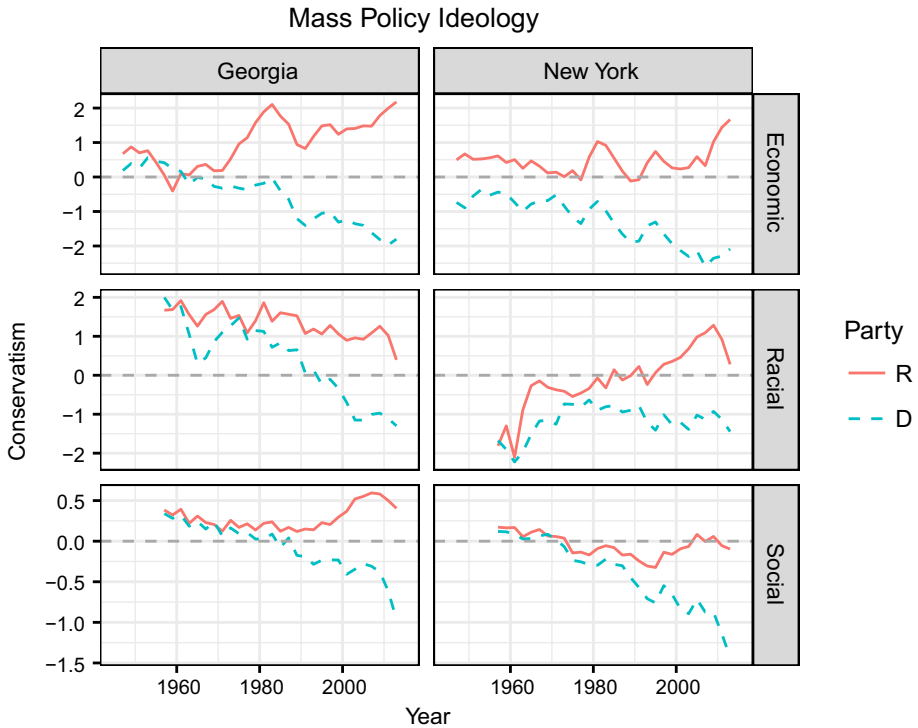


average conservatism of Democrats and Republicans and average this differences across states within years. The results, plotted in the bottom panel of Fig. 1, are similar but not identical to the middle panel's plot of partisan differences in raw proportions. The most obvious difference is that because the IRT approach accounts for differences across questions, the estimates are less affected by changes in the question mix and therefore are more stable over time. A second difference is that for almost the entire pre-2000 period, divergence on economic issues was greater than on social and racial issues. Moreover—and in contrast to the Senate—mass economic divergence increased fairly steadily from 1960 on, whereas social and racial divergence did not begin in earnest until the late 1970s. Notwithstanding that later start, by the twenty-first century the three domains all had converged at a much higher level of divergence than early in the period. Notably, the proportional increase in ideological divergence was larger in the mass public than in the Senate, especially on racial and social issues, which began from a starting point of almost no divergence.

The results reported in this section reinforce previous research in certain respects and challenge it in others. On one hand, in the first half of the period party had a larger standardized effect on Senate conservatism than on the conservatism of state-party publics. That evidence comports with, for example, the finding of Bafumi and Herron (2010) that most members of Congress take more extreme positions than the median party member in their respective constituencies. The second half of the period, when party's predictive value is about the same for senators and state publics, provides less support for that view. Of course, since the Senate and mass public are not jointly scaled, we cannot say anything firm about their relative locations. We are on firmer ground, however, when comparing trends over time. In that respect, the fact that mass divergence on economic issues began its long-run growth at least a decade before the Senate—as well as the fact that in all three domains the proportional increase in divergence was much greater at the mass level—runs contrary to the conventional view of mass polarization as a faint echo of elite polarization.

### 3 Ideological nationalization

Given the problems with comparing measures of intrastate divergence between the Senate and the mass public, we now turn to a scale-free measure: the proportion of the variance in senators' and state-party publics' conservatism explained by party (Poole and Rosenthal 1984; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015). On one hand, if partisans (in the Senate or in the public) differ little within party but greatly across states, almost none of the total variance will be attributable to party. For an example of such a situation, consider the two panels labeled "Racial" in the middle row of Fig. 2. The left panel plots the racial conservatism of Republican and Democratic identifiers in Georgia, and the right panel plots the analogous quantities in New York. In the 1950s, the publics of the two states differed massively in their racial conservatism, but on average Democrats and Republicans within each state took almost identical positions. In other words, party explained almost none of the variance in racial conservatism across state-party publics. Contrast this with the same quantities at the end of the period, when Democrats and Republicans were not only polarized on racial issues but took almost identical positions across states. Thus, whether because of changes in the composition of the party coalitions or shifts in partisans' issue attitudes, the explanatory power of party on racial issues increased hugely over this period and that



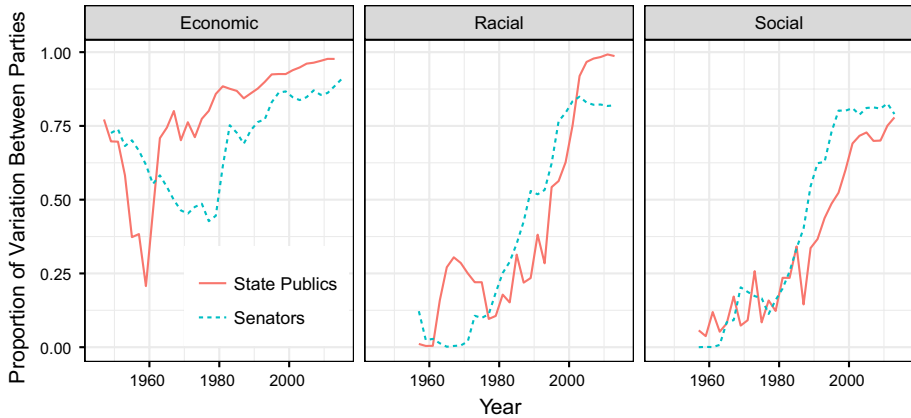
**Fig. 2** Ideological trends among Democrats and Republicans in Georgia and New York

of state correspondingly declined.<sup>9</sup> We refer to this process as the “ideological nationalization” of partisan subconstituencies (on the nationalization of American politics generally, see Lunch 1987; Hopkins 2018).

Figure 3 generalizes this analysis of ideological nationalization to all states, plotting the proportion of state-party publics’ ideological variation explained by partisanship in each domain and comparing it to the same quantity in the Senate.<sup>10</sup> The left panel of Fig. 3 plots nationalization of the roll-call behavior in the Senate and public opinion on the economic domain. Past work indicates that over the past half-century, the bulk of the variation

<sup>9</sup> Our aggregate-level data limit our ability to evaluate how much these developments were driven by changes in the demographic composition of the parties versus changes in individual issue attitudes. We suspect, however, that both factors were at play. We know, for example, that in the 1960s African Americans, who were and continue to be much more racially and economically liberal than whites, became much more likely to identify as Democrats (e.g., Petrocik 1987). This compositional change, along with conservative Southern whites’ more gradual countervailing shift toward the Republican Party (Green et al. 2002, pp. 140–163), likely explains much of the increase in divergence in Southern states, especially on racial issues. On the other hand, we also know that at least some of the growth in polarization is due to individuals’ changing their issue attitudes to match their party’s positions (Levendusky 2009a; Lenz 2012), and thus intrastate divergence is likely also a product of the changing issue attitudes of individuals who remained loyal to one party.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, within each biennium, we used analysis of variance to decompose variation in conservatism across senators/subconstituencies into between-party and within-party components. The proportion of variation explained by party is simply the between-party sum of squares divided by the total sum of squares.



**Fig. 3** Nationalization of mass opinion based on group-level IRT model. These plots show the percentage of variation in state-party public and Senate ideology on each domain explained by party

in senators' economic conservatism has been explained by party (Poole and Rosenthal 1984, p. 1067). Indeed, we find that with the exception of a dip during the 1960s–1970s, party has explained over half the variance in senators' economic conservatism for the vast majority of the past half century. The explanatory power of party affiliation increased markedly in the 1980s, to about 75%, of the total variance, and has continued to rise since then.

Economic issues have long divided the parties at the mass level as well (e.g., Stimson 2015, p. 70). In our data, we find that aside from a sharp but brief drop in the 1950s,<sup>11</sup> party explains most of the variation in economic conservatism across state-party publics throughout the period we examine. Indeed, since the mid-1960s party has explained a greater proportion of variation across state-party publics than across senators. Moreover, party-explained variance has continued to increase, from 75% around 1970 to over 95% in 2010, leaving very little additional variance to be explained by differences across states.

Changes on racial issues (Fig. 3, middle panel) were much more dramatic as well as more tightly linked between the Senate and the mass public. In the late 1950s, when our racial estimates begin, party explained almost no variance in racial conservatism in either arena. Over the next half century, the Senate and public time series rise in tandem, with little difference between them aside from an early spike in the mass public in the 1960s. The timing of that spike is consistent with Carmines and Stimson's (1989) argument that the clear division over civil rights in the 1964 presidential elections prompted racial liberals to realign their partisanship, though their analysis examined national rather than within-state shifts.<sup>12</sup> However, contrary to the claim that racial realignment had run its course by 1980 (Stimson 2015, p. 64), our data indicate that differences between the parties continued to

<sup>11</sup> In addition to being a period of unusually low partisan polarization, especially in presidential politics, the 1950s were also a dry spell for survey questions that tapped into ideological differences over economic policy (see Erskine 1964, pp. 154–155). Both factors may help explain the sudden drop in the explanatory power of party in this decade.

<sup>12</sup> Carmines and Stimson's analysis was based primarily on a handful of ANES questions. In contrast, we use nearly all available data on public opinion about race during this period from 46 question series across 73 polls.

widen through the end of the twentieth century, in the Senate as well as in the mass public. By the 2000s, party explained about 80% of the variance in senators' racial conservatism and nearly 100% of the variance in the mass public.

Lastly, the right panel of Fig. 3 examines the nationalization of public opinion and roll call votes on social and moral values issues. Past work has argued that social issues were unrelated to party until the 1990s, and the public sorted in the wake of greater clarity on national party positions (Adams 1997; Stimson 2015). Building on that work, which relied primarily on a handful of ANES and GSS questions, Fig. 3 shows the nationalization of public opinion on social issues across dozens of survey questions and hundreds of surveys. It indicates that only modest within-state variation in opinion across parties existed in the early 1970s. Opinion gradually sorted between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s. Consistent with past work, the nationalization of opinion really took off after 1990, and the explanatory power of party rose over the next decade or so and plateaued around 2000. Over the past decade and a half, party consistently has explained about 70% of the variation in state-party publics. Once again, the pattern in the Senate mirrors the pattern in the mass public. On social issues, party is only slightly more predictive of the positions of senators than it is of average opinion in their partisan subconstituencies.

Overall, we find that the ideological patterns of both senators and state-party publics clearly have nationalized on all three issue domains. Indeed, party explains the vast majority of the ideological variation for both the Senate and the public on all three domains over the past decade and a half. Moreover, the nationalizing trends in the Senate and the mass public parallel each other closely throughout the period. In fact, at any given point in time the variance in ideological positioning explained by party has been very similar in the public and the Senate.

#### 4 Collapsing dimensionality

Another salient trend identified by Poole and Rosenthal (2007), related to but conceptually distinct from partisan polarization, is the increasingly one-dimensional character of congressional roll-call voting (but see Aldrich et al. 2014). Whereas congressional voting on civil rights and other issues once were predicted poorly by the main, primarily partisan dimension of ideological variation, over the last half-century the importance of within-party cleavages has declined markedly. In the contemporary Congress, a single dimension is sufficient to capture the vast majority of systematic variation in the congressional roll-call voting.

Much less consensus, however, has emerged over the dimensionality of issue attitudes in the American mass public. Some studies assert that a single dimension is sufficient to summarize mass preferences, at least in the modern era (e.g., Jessee 2009; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015). Others highlight the importance of multiple dimensions, either in earlier decades (e.g., Poole 1998; Shafer and Claggett 1995; Caughey and Warshaw 2018) or continuing up to the present (e.g., Ansolabehere et al. 2008; Treier and Hillygus 2009; Peress 2013; Broockman 2016). Although our mass conservatism estimates, which assume unidimensionality within domain, cannot resolve this debate fully, they can shed light on how the dimensionality of mass opinion has changed over time, as well as on how the changes compare to those in Congress. To do so, we compare the correlations between economic, racial, and social conservatism in the Senate and the mass public. For the Senate, we calculate at each point in time the



**Fig. 4** Dimensionality in the Senate and mass public. The top panel shows the pairwise correlations between Senators’ ideal points on the economic, social, and racial dimensions. The bottom panel shows the same estimates for mean state-party positions on the same three dimensions, by year (i.e., averaging within years over state-parties). The dot-dashed blue line shows the correlations between the economic and racial dimensions; the solid red line shows those between the economic and social dimensions; and the dashed green line shows those between the social and racial dimensions. (Color figure online)

pairwise correlation between senators’ ideal points in each domain. For the mass public, we calculate analogous correlations for the average conservative in state-party publics in each domain. We then examine how the associations across domains have changed over time in each arena.

The results of this analysis are summarized in Fig. 4. The figure’s top panel, which plots trends in the Senate, shows that the association between senators’ economic, racial, and social conservatism has increased dramatically over time. Consistent with Poole and Rosenthal’s finding that civil rights primarily were a “second dimension” issue that divided the parties along regional lines, in the 1950s senators’ racial conservatism was almost uncorrelated with their conservatism on economic issues, the primary domain of ideological conflict in Congress in that era. Economic conservatism was only modestly more correlated with social conservatism, which was instead most closely aligned with conservatism on race. By the 1970s, however, racial and social conservatism had become

highly correlated with economic conservatism, suggesting that the same underlying dimension structured all three domains.<sup>13</sup>

Trends in the mass public (Fig. 4, bottom panel) were broadly similar. In the 1950s, the economic conservatism of state-party publics was unrelated to their racial and social conservatism, which were strongly correlated with each other. As in the Senate, the three domains had become roughly equally correlated by 1970, but the relationships among them remained relatively modest into the 1980s. Consistent with the “conflict extension” documented by Layman and Carsey (2002), however, the alignment across issue domains risen steadily through the end of the century. By the 2000s, mass conservatism was just as highly correlated across domains as was Senate conservatism.

Once again, then, a comparison between senators and their partisan subconstituencies reveals a surprising degree of similarity between the two. In both the Senate and the mass public, racial and social conservatism at midcentury varied along a distinct, mostly regional dimension that largely was orthogonal to ideological conflict over economics. By century’s end, conservatism at both levels had become highly correlated across domains. The primary difference between elite and mass trends is that ideological conflict collapsed to one dimension earlier in the Senate than in the public. Overall, however, the correspondence is again striking.

## 5 Conclusion

Among the most important long-term developments in American politics has been the nationalization of the party system. Classic works on American parties described them as decentralized, pragmatic, and relatively non-ideological confederations (e.g., Schattschneider 1942; Key 1964). In those accounts, state and local party organizations, through their control over patronage and nominations, enjoyed substantial autonomy from, even dominance over, their national counterparts. With party workers motivated less by policy achievements than by the spoils of office, state parties tended to be ideologically flexible, often deviating substantially from—or even reversing—the policy positions taken by Democrats and Republicans elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Since the mid-twentieth century, however, state and local party organizations have withered while national party institutions have grown in influence and importance (e.g., Epstein 1982; Lunch 1987). State party platforms have become more distinct ideologically (Paddock 1992) and more national in content (Hopkins and Schickler 2016), and party control of state offices now has both a strong correlation with and a clear causal effect on the liberalism of state policies (Caughy et al. 2017).

As the research of Poole and Rosenthal (among many others) has demonstrated, an important manifestation of this nationalizing trend has been the growing ideological homogeneity of the congressional parties and the decline of geographic cleavages within the parties. Today, the roll call records of Democrats and Republicans in Congress diverge sharply from one another. That is true even if they represent districts with similar partisan preferences (Ansolabehere et al. 2001; McCarty et al. 2009), are elected in a knife-edge

<sup>13</sup> This too is consistent with the analysis of first- and second-dimension NOMINATE scores in Poole and Rosenthal (2007).

<sup>14</sup> By the 1940s, for example, even as the Democratic Party in the South remained synonymous with white supremacy (Mickey 2015), state Democratic parties outside the South had become clearly more liberal on civil rights than their Republican counterparts (Feinstein and Schickler 2008).

race (Lee et al. 2004; Fowler and Hall 2017), or even share exactly the same constituency (Poole and Rosenthal 1984; Levitt 1996). Moreover, the ideological gap between the two parties in Congress has grown dramatically over time (Poole and Rosenthal 2007). Across issue domains, members of Congress from the same party now vote very similarly regardless of where they are from.

Despite a consensus in the literature on large and growing polarization among elites, previous studies have downplayed the degree of polarization between Democrats and Republicans in the mass public as well as the mass public's role in spurring elite polarization. Data and statistical limitations, however, have forced previous studies to either focus on changes in the ideological polarization of the mass public at the national level (Levendusky 2009b; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015) or use proxies for policy attitudes such as ideological identification (Erikson et al. 2006). That is problematic because in order to compare the polarization of the parties' mass constituencies and elites that represent them, we need measures of the ideological preferences of the average voter in each state-party and how these preferences are changing over time.

In this paper, we overcome the methodological limitations that have stymied past work on polarization in the mass public using a comprehensive, new dataset with over one million survey respondents from hundreds of individual polls. Overall, our findings contradict the previous consensus that polarization in Congress has proceeded much more rapidly than polarization in the mass public. In short, our focus on state-party publics reveals a much tighter correspondence between mass and elite polarization than the existing literature suggests.

We find that partisan divergence in the mass public has widened dramatically on all three issue domains we examine. Moreover, though partisan divergence in the American public has accelerated in the last few decades, it started earlier than existing accounts suggest. In addition, the proportional increase in divergence between the parties actually has been larger in the mass public than in the Senate. Whereas within-state differences in economic conservatism between Democratic and Republican senators have roughly doubled since the 1970s, intrastate divergence between partisan subconstituencies has increased fourfold.

To be sure, our data does not allow us to measure the ideological preferences of Congress and the public on the same scale. Thus the fact that the constituencies of each party have diverged substantially does not necessarily indicate that the divergence has reached the same level in Congress. However, using a scale-free measure to compare the explanatory power of party in the Senate and the mass public, we find strikingly similar trends between senators and their partisan subconstituencies. Ideological patterns of both senators and state-party publics have become substantially more nationalized.<sup>15</sup> The proportion of ideological variation explained by party grew especially dramatically in the social and racial domains. At any given point in time the variance in ideological positioning explained by party has been very similar in the public and the Senate.

Moreover, we examined the dimensional structure of the mass public's preferences and find that state-party publics' preferences on different domains were for much of the past six decades correlated only weakly. The liberalism of state-party publics was distinct on different domains. But the preferences of state-party publics increasingly have become correlated across issue domains as they have all collapsed to the same main dimension that

<sup>15</sup> See Hopkins (2018) for a detailed description of how voting patterns in state elections have also nationalized in recent decades.

divides the national parties (Stimson 2015, pp. 60–62). In fact, in recent years the ideological preferences of state-party publics are almost as one-dimensional as in the Senate.

Overall, our results show that intrastate polarization between the parties' constituencies has increased dramatically in recent decades. Moreover, the trends in mass polarization largely mirror the trends in elite polarization originally identified by Poole and Rosenthal (1984) and examined in more depth in Poole and Rosenthal (2007). We emphasize that our findings do not speak directly to the causal relationship between mass opinion and elite behavior. We cannot assess whether senators are responding to changes in mass polarization or the other way around, or whether both are driven by some omitted variable, such as changes in the economy. But our findings do suggest that the political decisions in Congress are not wildly out of synch with the views of voters. Moreover, they suggest that more attention should focus on the dyadic links between the preferences of the mass public and elites.

The ideological nationalization of the US party system has a number of consequences for American politics. It has limited the two parties' abilities to tailor their positions to local conditions (see Ansolabehere et al. 2001). Moreover, it has led to greater geographic concentration of the parties' respective support coalitions.<sup>16</sup> The combination of those factors has reduced the number of states wherein each party can compete effectively for statewide office. One manifestation of this nationalizing trend is the growing percentage of states with two senators from the same party, which increased from 50% in 1980 to over 70% in 2018 (Brunell and Grofman 2018; DeSilver 2018; cf. Poole and Rosenthal 1984, pp. 1064–1066). Today, across all offices, conservative states nowadays largely are dominated by Republicans, whereas the opposite is true of liberal states. The ideological nationalization of the party system thus seems to have undermined party competition at the state level.

Finally, at a methodological level, this article highlights one of the many possible substantive applications using estimates of public opinion at the level of states or state-parties that vary over time. Future work could examine how the growing divergence between the parties' constituencies in the mass public has affected the positioning of individual senators. It also could examine the effect of mass polarization on the ideological positioning of state elected officials (e.g., Shor and McCarty 2011) as well as the policies that state governments produce (e.g., Caughey et al. 2017).

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<sup>16</sup> There is an active debate about how much of the growing geographic concentration of each party's coalitions is due to residential sorting (Bonica et al. 2017; Mummolo and Nall 2017), cohort effects (Ghitza and Gelman 2014), racial polarization and geographic changes in the distribution of minority populations (Bowler and Segura 2011), or individuals' switching parties (e.g., Levendusky 2009a; Highton and Kam 2011).



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