

The Policy Polarization of Party Activists in the United States

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Abstract

This article investigates how a key stratum of the partisan elite—party activists—have been positioned across time and policy issues. We examine the extent to which activists have polarized symmetrically or asymmetrically and find that only on the issue of abortion has one party’s activists (Republicans) polarized notably more than the other’s. The article also analyzes party activist proximity to the mass public’s policy preferences and finds that Democrats are consistently closer to the public on economic issues, and Republicans are consistently closer on a subset of non-economic issues. Our findings suggest the need for more nuanced theories of party activism and polarization along with providing a useful lens through which to view party electoral competition.

Keywords

public opinion, party polarization, political activists, American politics

Party activists in the U.S. serve as a fulcrum between the mass public at one end and candidates and officeholders at the other. Activists influence candidate selection and policy platforms through resource expenditures and their sway over public opinion, while they simultaneously influence partisan opinion in the mass public (Bawn et al., 2012; Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Carmines & Wagner, 2006; Claassen, 2015; Layman et al., 2010; Lupton et al., 2017; Miller & Schofield, 2003). Thus the policy preferences of party activists are an integral “input” into the operation of the party system and representation process. This article analyzes how Democratic and Republican party activists, as a key stratum of the partisan elite, have moved and been positioned over time across a variety of issues spanning the social welfare, cultural, racial, and other dimensions of American politics.

An important topic in its own right, the significance of our investigation is heightened because it connects to an important scholarly (and political) question regarding whether party elites have been polarizing in recent decades in a symmetric or asymmetric fashion. While spatial models of politics have been developed to explain non-convergence to the median voter, they typically predict that in a two party system the liberal party will be as extreme on the left as the conservative party will be on the right (Aldrich, 1983a, 1983b; Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams, 2009; Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, 2011; Grossman & Hopkins, 2016). In contrast, coalitional accounts of parties that take into account particular aspects of American political and economic history, along with electoral rules, allow for—and even predict—asymmetry in party elite movement and proximity to the mass public (Bonica et al., 2013; Grossman & Hopkins, 2016;

Hacker & Pierson, 2014, 2015; Klein, 2020; Layman et al., 2010; Lelkes & Sniderman, 2016).¹

To analyze party activists we rely on the American National Election Studies (ANES) time series surveys. These surveys allow us to analyze a wide range of issues over an extended period of time (1972–2016). In addition, unlike much of the existing work on party elite polarization that focuses on legislators and candidates for elective office, the ANES data enable us to place the preferences of party activists and the mass public on the same scales. This aspect of the data makes it possible to measure activist movement and proximity *relative* to the opinions expressed by the mass public.

We find growing activist polarization across all issues with the exception of gay rights where there has been noticeable depolarization in party activist preferences. With respect to symmetric versus asymmetric party activist movement, our results suggest that in general there has not been much notable asymmetric movement. The important exception is on the abortion issue where Republican activists have moved rightward to a much greater extent than Democrat activists have moved to the left. Despite the general lack of asymmetric party activist movement, there remain notable asymmetries in proximity to the public’s preferences. Democratic party elites are typically closer to the overall mass public’s preferences

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on social welfare issues while there is either little difference between the parties or Republican party elites are advantaged on non-economic issues.

Overall, our findings do not conform neatly to any particular theory of party elite polarization. However, they do stand in contrast to the growing “conventional wisdom” (Broockman & Skovron, 2018, p. 542) that the disproportionate movement of Republican party elites is responsible for the asymmetric polarization that characterizes the contemporary American party system (e.g., McCarty, 2019).² Our results and their implications highlight the need for further nuance in both theory and description. In the Conclusion we suggest some possibilities for moving in this direction.

Background

Few question the proposition that the ideological and policy distances between Democratic and Republican party elites have been increasing over time.³ Early scholars of polarization observed that on the longstanding social welfare dimension of politics, the parties began moving further apart in 1970s (McCarty et al., 1997; Poole & Daniels, 1985; Poole & Rosenthal, 1984, 1997). Civils rights and issues of racial equality that had largely been muted in national politics became evident and started growing the decade before (Carmines & Stimson, 1986, 1989).⁴ Cultural issues, like abortion and gay rights, eventually followed, too (Adams, 1997; Layman, 2001). Ideological and policy “conflict extension” has become the “dominant theme in observations about contemporary party politics” in the United States (Layman et al., 2006, p. 84).

While the phenomenon of increasing party elite polarization is evident, important issues remain unsettled. The question of whether the causes—whatever they may be—have influenced the parties similarly has been investigated by many without resolution.⁵ Empirically, the evidence appears mixed. Analyses of congressional roll call voting with measures like DW-NOMINATE tend to find “asymmetric polarization” with movement of Republican members of Congress in the conservative direction notably more substantial than the movement of Democrats in the liberal direction (McCarty, 2019; McCarty et al., 1997, 2006). However, estimating ideological locations of members of Congress based on campaign finance data (CF-scores) and surveys of congressional candidates (NPAT) suggest the opposite (Bonica, 2014; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2017).⁶ Among state legislators, roll call data indicates more modest partisan asymmetries with some regional variation (McCarty & Shor, 2016).

For our purposes, a key consideration is that party elites who are neither office holders nor candidates for elective office have received far less attention with regard to the question of asymmetric polarization.⁷ In particular, party activists have been understudied. By “activists” we mean people who, in addition to voting, participate in politics to support and/or influence their preferred parties, candidates, and causes. They

“can be counted on to work for a variety of candidates and offices from time to time with regularity” (Aldrich, 1983b, p. 65). They “pay substantially more attention to politics and are more heavily involved in political activities than [those] . . . who only show up at the voting booth every 4 years” (Carmines & Wagner, 2006, p. 71). Activists are “the core of any movement. . . . Activists are not just voters who are sympathetic to the movement. . . . They are the ones willing to take some action for the cause” (Bailey et al., 2012, p. 71).

As virtually all party scholars agree, activists are key political actors. Some view them as “the crucial mediating link between the mass electorate on the one hand and elite party actors on the other hand” (Carmines & Woods, 2002, p. 363) who facilitate the clarification of party positions and contribute to mass polarization through “issue evolution” (Carmines & Stimson, 1986, 1989; Carmines & Wagner, 2006). Others see them as highly influential on party platforms and candidate selection and issue positions (Bawn et al., 2012; Cohen et al., 2008; Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Karol, 2009; Layman et al., 2010; Masket, 2009). Indeed, “[a]lthough largely overlooked in traditional accounts of party development, activists recently have been identified as critical to understanding the origins and trajectory of parties because they shape the parties’ agendas and, consequently, the attitudes of party followers in the electorate” (Lupton et al., 2017, p. 891). Also important, because activists tend to “desire policies that are far from the electoral center” (Miller & Schofield, 2008, p. 434), they are believed to serve as a polarizing force in a party system (Abramowitz, 2010; Aldrich, 1983a; Layman et al., 2010).⁸

While research on party activists is rich and insightful in general, examining the important roles that activists have in the party system and the consequences of their activity, very little of it analyzes the policy positions and movements of activists over time (Carmines & Woods, 2002; Layman & Carsey, 1998; Layman et al., 2006, 2010; Saunders & Abramowitz, 2004) and only Layman et al. (2010) and Saunders and Abramowitz (2004) consider asymmetric activist polarization.

Layman et al. (2010) analyze party convention delegates—as a particular subset of party activists—and find that in the early 1970s Democratic delegates were already quite liberal on a range of policies while Republicans were only clearly conservative on racial issues. By 2004 Republican delegates moved significantly in the conservative direction on cultural and social welfare issues with Democratic delegates having moved more modestly in the liberal direction.⁹ However, Layman et al. (2010) limit their analysis of activists’ ideological movement to the domain level, and so are unable to capture differences in the level of partisan asymmetry among issues in the same domain, as we find occurs between federal spending and social safety net issues (both in the social welfare domain).

Saunders and Abramowitz (2004) analyze “active partisans” and find that in the 1970s Republican activists were

modestly more extreme than Democratic activists, and that from the 1970s to the 1990s there was asymmetric polarization with Republican activists moving further to the right than Democratic activists moved to the left. Saunders and Abramowitz assess activist issue position asymmetry on an issue-by-issue basis, and compare the distances between party activists' positions and those of the mass public. They find greater distance between Republican activists' mean ideological position and the public's than between Democrat activists' and the public's on economic and environmental regulatory issues, but not on social issues (where the distances are approximately the same). However, the analysis is limited to a single cross-section (pooled 1994–2000 ANES data), so that they are unable to capture significant changes in these differences over time, as we observe occurs with the death penalty, and aid to blacks.¹⁰

In sum, much of the work on the question of party elite asymmetric polarization has not focused on party activists. Existing research on party activists is limited in scope with not much emphasis on activists' policy positions and movements over time. This article offers a unique combination of temporal and policy depth in its investigation of the policy positions and movement of party activists. In doing so, we are able to offer important new insights that carry important implications for the study of partisan polarization.¹¹

Hypotheses

Here we undertake a more wide-ranging analysis of the polarization of party activists than found in previous research. Of special interest to us is whether the particular characteristics of American parties, the party system, or American political development may have caused the activists from one of the parties to polarize more than the other's and move further away from the typical American's policy preferences. We ask whether asymmetric—versus symmetric—polarization better describes party activist polarization in American politics from the 1970s to the present.

The development of our hypotheses begins with the observation when an issue divides the parties, party activists serve as a polarizing force (Carmines & Wagner, 2006). Relative to the preferences of the mass public, Democratic activists will typically be more liberal and Republican activists will be more conservative. This may result from activists pushing the parties toward their preferred positions (e.g., Bawn et al., 2012; Karol, 2009) or the parties moving to capture activists (e.g., Miller & Schofield, 2003; Schofield & Miller, 2007). This centrifugal force on the party systems works in opposition to the centripetal electoral pull of the median voter (Downs, 1957). The equilibrium is some level of polarization: “theoretical work on party and candidate policy positions long has argued that party activists help to pull parties and candidates away from the median voter and to create partisan differences on policy issues” (Layman

et al., 2006, p. 96). More specifically, the equilibrium is *symmetric* polarization:

So long as only one party moves away from the center . . . electoral punishment results, and even ideologically motivated party activists eventually get the message. . . . But if both parties move away from the center and locate at a more or less *equal distance* from the mainstream, then electoral punishment need not result” (M. P. Fiorina, with Jeremy Pope and Samuel J. Abrams, 2006, p. 169, emphasis added).

From this theoretical perspective, two hypotheses follow. One specifies how party elites' positions change over time:

H1 (Symmetric Movement): Over time, Democratic activists will move the same amount in the liberal direction that Republican activists move in the conservative direction (relative to the preferences of the mass public).

A second hypothesis relates to the relative proximity of party elites to the public at any given point in time:

H2 (Proximity Equality): On issues that divide the parties, Democratic activists will be more liberal than the mass public to the same degree that Republican activists are more conservative than the mass public.

Theories of asymmetric polarization begin with the same logic that underlies the “activist symmetry” hypotheses (H1 and H2) and then identify particular aspects of American political development to arrive at the alternative view. Some have argued that the parties are structured in very different ways (e.g., Grossman & Hopkins, 2015, 2016; Lupton et al., 2017) or have different “cultures” (e.g., Freeman, 1986) that leave them either differentially susceptible to the influence of activists or differentially able to influence them. Either way, asymmetric polarization becomes a more likely outcome. Likewise for the “conflict extension” theory of party politics where there is less interplay between the parties and “change need not be symmetrical” (Layman et al., 2010, p. 329). Therefore:

H3 (Asymmetric Movement): Over time and relative to the public, Democratic activists may not move the same amount in the liberal direction that Republican activists move in the conservative direction.

H4 (Proximity Asymmetry): On issues that divide the parties, Democratic activists may not be more liberal than the public to the same degree that Republican activists are more conservative than the public.

With respect to H3 and H4 (and H5 and H6, below) it is worth noting that asymmetric movement does not necessarily imply proximity asymmetry. Asymmetric movement will only necessarily produce proximity asymmetry when party activists start from a position of proximity equality. If the

parties start from a position of proximity asymmetry, then asymmetric movement could operate to produce proximity equality or proximity asymmetry or both.¹²

While H3 and H4 specify “activist asymmetry,” a series of arguments leads to the prediction of a specific form of asymmetry, namely that polarization forces will influence the Republican party more than the Democratic party. One rationale is rooted in electoral incentives. It argues that because of partisan gerrymandering and the inefficient distribution of Democratic voters, the median voter within subnational constituencies is often to the right of the national median voter. This puts pressure on the Democrats to stay more moderate while allowing Republicans more leeway to be conservative (Hacker & Pierson, 2015; Klein, 2020).

A second rationale is based on the growing dependence of candidates on individual contributions for campaign fundraising, especially contributions from the very wealthy (Bonica et al., 2013). Because there is a correlation between wealth and economic conservatism, this increased reliance on the wealthy may have constrained Democratic movement to the left while facilitating Republican movement to the right (Bonica et al., 2013; Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Page & Gilens, 2017).¹³ Related, growing income inequality and the decline of union power and membership may have contributed to this asymmetry (Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Williamson et al., 2011). Thus activist polarization asymmetry may be the result, especially on economic and social welfare issues.

The asymmetric accounts of American party politics produce a third set of hypotheses about party activist polarization compared to the symmetric hypotheses¹⁴:

H5 (Republican Asymmetric Movement): Over time and relative to the public, Republican activists will move more in the conservative direction than Democratic activists move in the liberal direction.

H6 (Democratic Proximity Advantage): On issues that divide the parties, Democratic activists will be less ideologically extreme on the liberal side than Republican activists are on the conservative side.

Thus there are plausible and competing theoretical arguments predicting symmetric and asymmetric polarization. And, there is a lack of clarity in existing research on the empirical reality regarding the patterns of party activist polarization. In what follows, we analyze the preferences of party activists across a wider range of issues over a longer period of time than in previous research in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the nature of partisan activist polarization in the U.S.

Data and Methods

For data, we rely on the *American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series Cumulative Data File*.¹⁵ ANES surveys

were fielded in every presidential year from 1948 to 2016 and every midterm year until 2002. Given our need for comparability over time, we exclusively focus on presidential election years.¹⁶ While the period covered for specific issues varies by policy, the earliest survey that includes comparable questions to the most recent surveys is 1972. Therefore, our empirical analysis begins with the 1972 ANES data.

Following almost all research that measures political activism with the ANES surveys (e.g., Abramowitz, 2010; Bartels, 2016; Carmines & Wagner, 2006; Carmines & Woods, 2002; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Saunders & Abramowitz, 2004), we rely on a set of self-reported items. In addition to asking about voter turnout, the surveys regularly include questions about other forms of political participation: whether respondents (1) tried to influence the vote of others, (2) attended meetings, (3) did other work for a candidate or party, (4) displayed a button or bumper sticker, and (5) contributed money to a candidate or party. Supplemental Appendix Table SA2 shows the distributions of the number of activities respondents report having engaged in overall and by year. Across all the surveys, about 6% of respondents report engaging in four or more of the six activities (including voting). It is these people that we define as “activists.”¹⁷

For policy preferences, we create several within-domain issue scales, and we also analyze some individual items.¹⁸ Beginning with the social welfare or economic domain, the ANES has regularly asked three questions about the proper role for the government to play in providing a social safety net. One asks about health care; another asks about jobs; and, the third asks about the tradeoff between government services and spending reductions. All three provide respondents with seven point scales ranging from very conservative to very liberal response options (e.g., from the view that medical costs being the responsibility of individuals and private insurance companies to the view that all medical costs should be covered by a government insurance plan). The question about jobs was asked in every presidential year from 1972 to 2016. The question about health care was asked in every year except 1980; the government services question was asked in every year except 1972, 1976, and 1980. To maintain continuity and comparability over time, we employed simple linear imputation to produce values for the issue-years when the questions were not asked.¹⁹ We rescaled each item to range from 0 (the most conservative response option) to 1 (the most liberal option) and computed the mean for each respondent in each year and refer to this variable as *Safety Net preferences*.²⁰

A second measure of economic policy preferences is based on a set of questions that ask whether federal spending in a variety of areas should be decreased, kept the same, or increased. These items were introduced in the 1984 ANES survey, and while the list of specific areas asked about has changed, some items have been repeated often, and those are the ones on which we focus. For the nine presidential elections between 1984 and 2016, the federal spending question

has been asked about child care and the environment eight times; it has been asked about the poor and welfare seven times; and, it was asked about public schools in all nine surveys. Like the items about government aid, for years when an item was not asked we imputed values based on the other items and then rescaled all the items to range from 0 (most conservative response—reduce spending) to 1 (most liberal response—increase spending) and then averaged across the items for each respondent in each year. We refer to this variable as preferences regarding *Federal Spending*.

In the cultural issue domain we measure abortion policy preferences and opinion regarding gay rights. In 1972 the ANES asked about the circumstances under which women should be allowed to have an abortion, and in 1980 the question was revised. Although the specific wordings are not identical, both questions include four response options that range from no circumstances under which abortion should be allowed to abortion always being allowed. Fortunately, both versions were included in the 1980 ANES. We take advantage of this to facilitate comparability in our measure of abortion policy preferences from 1972 to 2016.²¹

A question regarding gay rights first appeared on the 1988 ANES survey and since then three questions have been repeated a handful of times. One question about protecting homosexuals/gays and lesbians from job discrimination was included in all eight presidential year surveys between 1988 and 2016. Another asking about service in the military was asked six times, as was another about being able to legally adopt children. After imputing values for the years when military service and adoption were not asked, we created a scale (*Gay Rights*) by averaging responses to all three questions in a manner similar to the scales for *Safety Net* and *Federal Spending*.

In the racial issues domain the ANES surveys regularly include a seven point scale used to measure how much help people think blacks/minorities should receive from the government (*Aid to Blacks*). This item was asked in every presidential year from 1972 to 2016. Beginning in 1988 the ANES began including items to tap “racial resentment.” While the questions do not ask specifically about policy, they do imply policy preferences and are correlated with them and have become an accepted way to measure racial attitudes (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Tesler & Sears, 2010; Valentino & Sears, 2005).²²

The final two issues we analyze are *Immigration* and the *Death Penalty*. Preferences about immigration are measured by asking respondents about its appropriate level. The question was asked only as far back as 1996, but given the salience of the issue in recent elections (especially 2016) we include it in the analysis. Respondents’ opinions about the death penalty are measured with a question asking about whether they support it for people convicted of murder.

For each issue in each year there are several quantities of interest. The mass public’s collective preference on issue j in year y (m_{jy}) is the mean of the issue measure among the

roughly 94% of the people who are not party activists. Estimating the preferences of Democratic and Republican party activists is not as straightforward.²³ The reason is the small numbers of activists in each party in each year’s ANES survey. Before any loss of cases due to non-response, in just 4 of the 24 party-years (2 parties \times 12 election years) are there more than 100 respondents; the median is just 49. In light of these small sample sizes, we adopt an approach employed by Gilens (2005, 2012). We leverage the relationship between political activity and preferences (by party) to estimate the preferences of the most politically active who we define as “activists”—those who engage in four or more political activities. For Democrats and Republicans separately, for a given issue j in year y we regress preferences regarding j on the level of political activity and then use the predicted preferences for activists as our measure of activist preferences (d_{jy} and r_{jy} , Democratic and Republican activists, respectively).^{24,25}

With these three quantities (m_{jy} , d_{jy} , and r_{jy}) we can compute a host of other quantities of interest. In a given year we can observe the locations of party activists relative to the public [$(d_{jy} - m_{jy})$ and $(r_{jy} - m_{jy})$].²⁶ Observing these quantities over time will enable us to test the hypotheses about symmetric/asymmetric party activist change (H1, H3, and H5). We can also compute the relative Democratic/Republican activist proximity advantage by subtracting one from the other ($|d_{jy} - m_{jy}| - |r_{jy} - m_{jy}|$). These values (observed across issues and over time) provide evidence to assess the proximity advantage hypotheses (H2, H4, and H6).

Finally, given the multiple stages in the measurement process (e.g., imputation for years when questions were not asked) and the variety of quantities of interest that are not simply means or regression coefficients, we employed the non-parametric bootstrap to estimate the uncertainty in our estimates.²⁷ Specifically, we drew $N=1,000$ samples, with replacement, from the empirical distribution of respondents (stratified by year). Then, we computed all quantities of interest in each of the 1,000 samples. The standard deviation of a quantity serves as that quantity’s estimated standard error.²⁸

Results

We begin the presentation of the results by replicating some of what has been done in previous work. Figure 1 shows the levels of party polarization for party activists across issues and over time. Higher values indicate greater party polarization with Democrats being more liberal than Republicans. To facilitate observing long-term trends in this—and subsequent—figures we plot loess regression lines, too.

For both economic issues (*Safety Net* and *Federal Spending*) the patterns of results are what one would expect: polarization has been evident for decades and has been increasing over time. The same is evident for the two racial issues (*Aid to Blacks* and *Racial Resentment*). For *Abortion*,

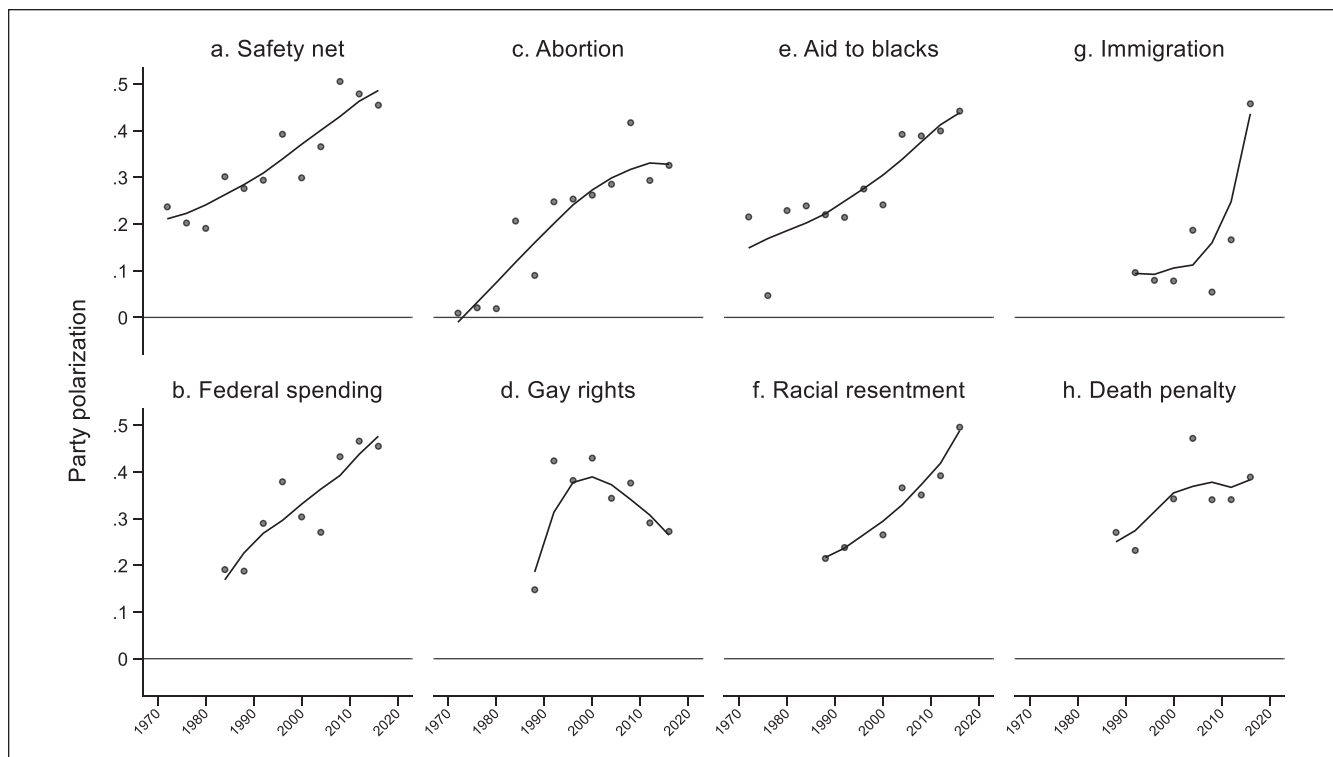


Figure 1. Party polarization among party activists over time.

the 1970s was not a period of party polarization, but the pace picked up considerably afterward. Although not the particular focus of our analysis here, on the other issues, there are some findings of note with regard to polarization levels. On *Gay Rights*, activist polarization jumped in the early 1990s (perhaps due to the rise in prominence and subsequent debate over the “gays in the military” issue) and has been in decline since that time. *Immigration* preferences displayed little party polarization until the most recent period when a substantial increase is evident.

Next we move to the main focus of our analyses: asymmetries in party activist locations and movements relative to the average person in the mass public. We proceed first by using the average non-activist as the reference point against which we locate party activists $[(d_{jy} - m_{jy}) \text{ and } (r_{jy} - m_{jy})]$. Positive values indicate activists as more liberal than the mass public and negative values indicate activists who are more conservative than the public. And, the closer the value is to zero the closer the preferences of activists are to those of the mass public.

The growing party activist polarization evident in Figure 1 is clearly not due to only one party’s activists becoming more extreme. Figure 2 shows that neither party’s activists’ locations have been constant over time. In general, Democratic party activists have become more liberal and Republican activists more conservative with the amount and timing of the movements varying across issues and parties. There are just three exceptions. While Democratic activists are increasingly liberal

on the death penalty there has been hardly any movement among Republican activists. And, on the issue of gay rights, after both parties’ activists became more extreme in the early 1990s, they both have become more moderate since then.

To directly test the asymmetric movement hypotheses we focus on the loess fit lines. We record the value for the earliest year available (ranging from 1972 for *Safety Net*, *Abortion*, and *Aid to Blacks* to 1992 for *Immigration*) and the last year available (2016 for all issues). Then we compute the absolute value of the difference between the former and the latter to measure the amount of change for each party’s activists.²⁹ Subtracting the amount of change among Republican activists from the amount of change among Democratic activists provides an estimate of asymmetric change. Positive values of the quantity indicate that Democratic activists changed more than Republican activists. Negative values indicate the reverse. To take into account the different amounts of time over which change is measured across issues we also divide this quantity by the length of time for which issue preferences are available (ranging from 24 years for *Immigration* to 44 years for *Safety Net*, *Abortion*, and *Aid to Blacks*). We multiply these quantities by 10 to produce the estimated amount of asymmetry in movement per decade.

Consider a specific example. On the *Safety Net* issue, the loess regression based on estimated Democratic party activists’ locations produces a value of +0.07 for 1972 and +0.20 for 2016 for an estimated change of 0.13 (in the liberal

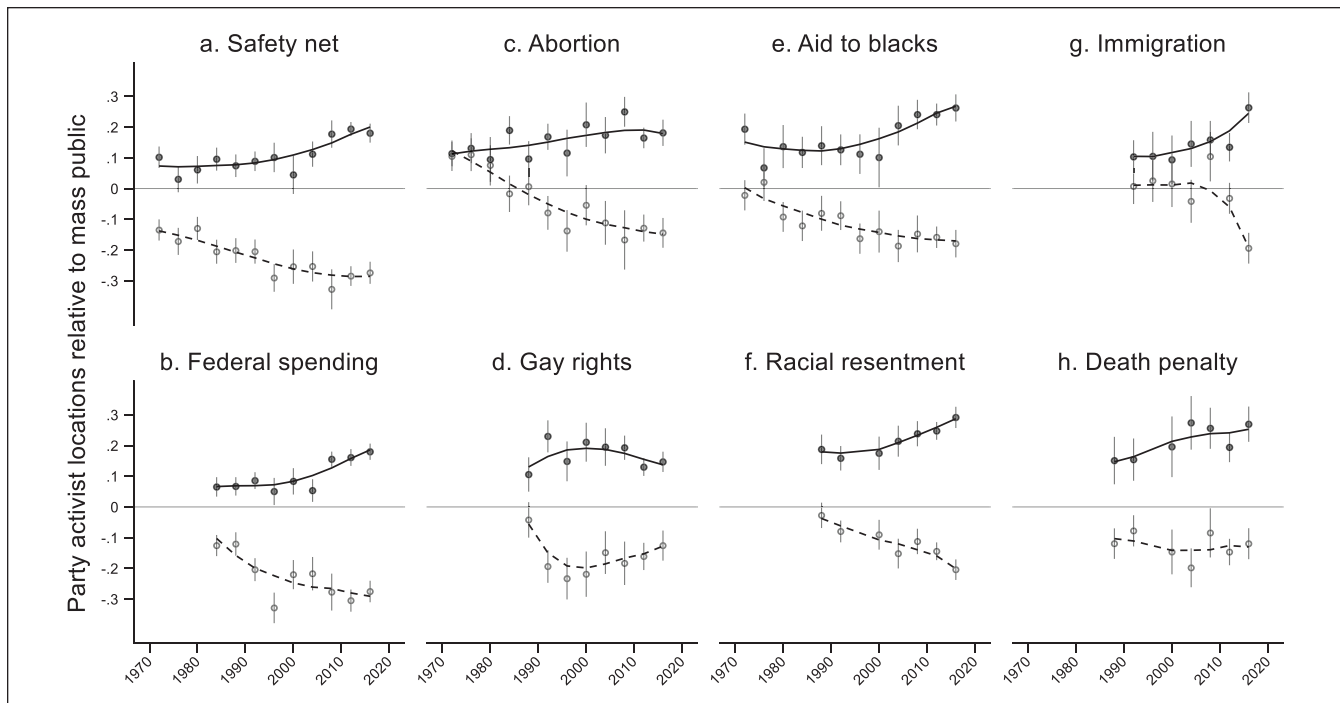


Figure 2. Party activist locations relative to mass public over time. Note. The solid lines are loess fit lines for Democratic activists. Dashed lines are for Republican activists. Dots indicate point estimates, and vertical lines represent 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

direction). The corresponding estimates for Republican party activists are -0.14 and -0.29 for an estimated change of 0.15 (in the conservative direction). Thus we estimate that Republicans moved more than Democrats by 0.02 (0.15 vs. 0.13), which is 0.005 per decade.³⁰ Supplemental Appendix Table SA4 reports all of the values for all of the issues and Figure 3 shows normalized (per decade) asymmetry estimates along with the bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals.

As suggested in Figure 2 and shown more precisely in Supplemental Appendix Table SA4, the largest movement across all the issues was for Republican activists on *Abortion*. Compared to the mass public, Republican activists were estimated to be 0.12 more liberal in 1972 than the public and 0.15 more conservative by 2016 for a total change of 0.27 . Democratic activists started in almost an identical place as Republican activists on *Abortion* and over time they did become more liberal, but by just 0.07 . Thus, Republican activists moved in the conservative direction by nearly four times as much as Democratic activists moved in the liberal direction (0.27 vs. 0.07). This overall difference in party activist change (0.20) translates into differential change of 0.047 more Republican change per decade, as shown in Figure 3.

The partisan asymmetry on *Abortion* is the largest in magnitude across all eight issues. In terms of overall asymmetry it is about three times as large as the second largest asymmetry. Moreover, as shown in Figure 3, when normalized on a per decade basis, *Abortion* activist partisan asymmetry is

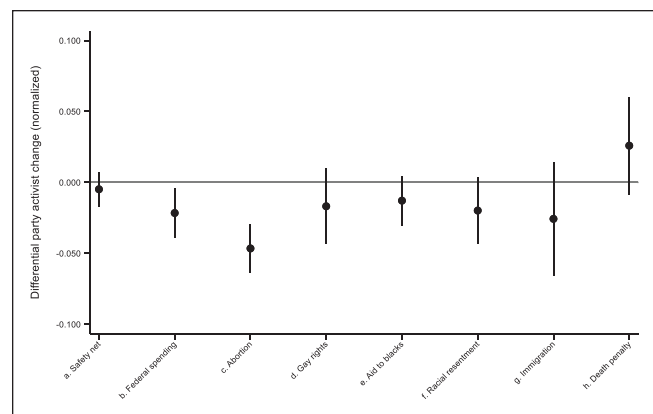


Figure 3. Differential party activist change over time. Note. Positive (negative) values indicate more change among Democratic (Republican) party activists. Dots are point estimates and lines are 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

about twice as large as the cluster of issues that follow it [*Immigration* (-0.026), *Death Penalty* (0.026), *Federal Spending* (-0.022), and *Racial Resentment* (-0.020)].

There is just one issue other than *Abortion*—*Federal Spending*—for which the observed partisan asymmetry reaches conventional levels of statistical significance (as indicated by the 95% confidence interval not crossing the value of 0 on the y-axis). To be sure, with the exception of the *Death Penalty*, Figure 3 does show a pattern of partisan

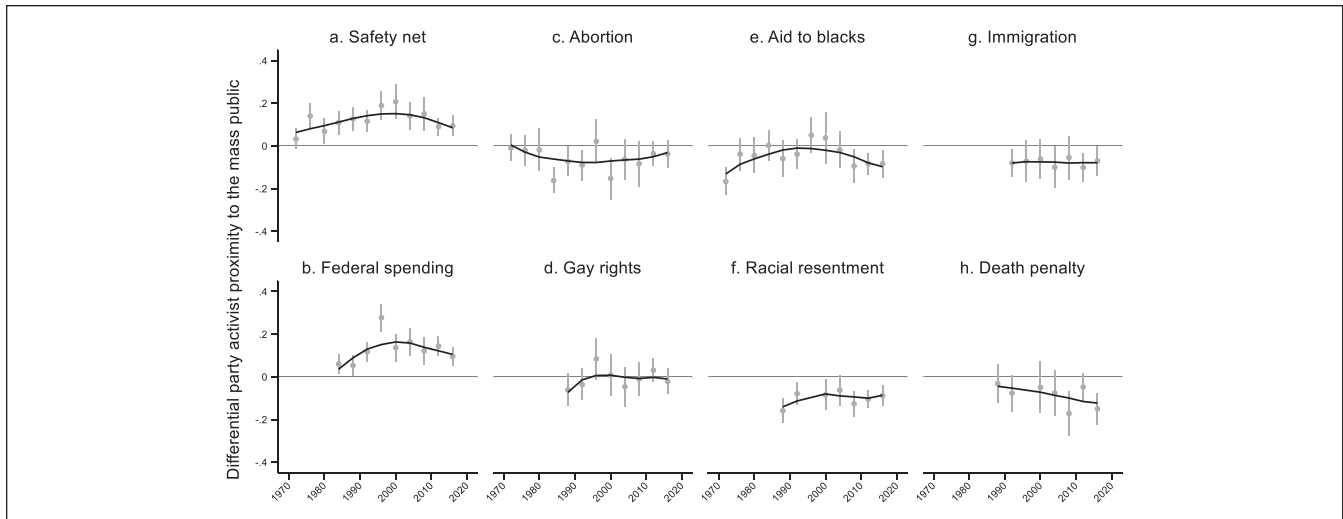


Figure 4. Party activist proximity advantages.

Note. Positive (negative) values indicate that Democratic (Republican) activists are closer to the mass public than Republican (Democratic) activists are. Dots indicate point estimates, and vertical lines represent 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

asymmetry where Republican activists have moved more in the conservative direction than Democratic activists have in the liberal direction. But, the *Abortion* issue is the only where the asymmetry appears especially notable substantively.

Abortion also nicely demonstrates the distinction between asymmetric movement and proximity advantage. While asymmetric movement refers to one party's activists' locations changing more than other party's, proximity advantage refers to one party's activists' location being closer to the mass public's than the other party's. If one were to draw the conclusion that Democratic activists developed a proximity advantage on *Abortion* because Republican activists moved in the conservative direction by more than four times the amount that Democratic activists moved in the liberal direction, one would be wrong. The reason is that in the 1970s as Republican activists began moving in the conservative direction on *Abortion* they were actually moving closer to the mass public because both party's activists had been more liberal than the mass public in 1972. Figure 4 illustrates the point, by showing the relative party activist proximity advantage. Positive value indicate that Democratic activists are closer to mass public and negative values indicate that Republican activists are closer. On *Abortion*, Republican activists consistently (in 10 of the 12 years) have a proximity advantage over Democrats, and in 2 years the magnitude is especially notable (1984 and 2000) reaching -0.15 ($p < .01$).

Turning to the full set of issues, Figure 4 shows that neither party's activists have a consistent advantage across all the issues. On the social welfare/economic issues (*Safety Net* and *Federal Spending*) Democratic activists are closer to the preferences of the mass public than Republicans are in every

year and with only a couple of exceptions those proximity advantages can be distinguished from zero ($p < .05$). In contrast, Republican activists are consistently closer to the mass public on racial issues (*Aid to Blacks* and *Racial Resentment*) along with *Immigration* and the *Death Penalty*. The stability in the Republican advantage on *Immigration* is particularly notable given especially large changes in both parties' activists' locations on the issue in recent years. Finally, the Republican activist advantage on cultural/moral issue of *Abortion* does not appear to extend to the other issue in that domain—*Gay Rights*. While there is some instability over time, the loess line shows that in general neither party's activists are advantaged on that issue.

Summary

We now return to the polarization theories and the hypotheses that followed from them (H1–H6). Three of the hypotheses address the magnitude of movement among party elites over time. H1 specified symmetric movement while H3 specified asymmetric movement and H5 specified a specific form of asymmetric movement (Republican activists changing more than Democratic activists). Our results (Supplemental Appendix Table SA4 and Figures 2 and 3) indicate that on only two issues (*Abortion* and *Federal Spending*) can we be reasonably confident about asymmetric movement and on only one (*Abortion*) is the magnitude of asymmetry substantively notable. The movement on *Abortion* is consistent with the Republican Asymmetric Movement hypothesis (H5). Overall, with respect to the question of symmetric versus asymmetric party elite change it does not appear that a general theory of party polarization is sufficient to explain the results here. Even one that singles out cultural/moral issues

as distinct faces hard questions because while *Abortion* clearly demonstrates asymmetry, *Gay Rights* just as clearly does not.

The second set of hypotheses addresses the proximity of party activist policy locations to those of the mass public. H2 specifies Proximity Equality while H4 specifies Proximity Asymmetry and H6 contends that there is asymmetry that produces a Democratic Proximity Advantage. As in the case of the party activist changes hypotheses, our proximity results are not consistent across all issues (Figure 4). But some patterns are evident and notable. On both social welfare/economic issues (*Safety Net* and *Federal Spending*), consistent with H6, Democratic party elites appear to have been closer to the public's preferences for the entire time period (1972–2016) without much long-term trend toward larger (or smaller) advantages over the Republicans. These results are consistent with the theories that emphasize the reliance of parties and candidates on wealthy (and more economically conservative) donors. They also suggest that instead of that dependence operating to a greater extent in more recent elections (with the effect of pulling Democrats toward the center and pushing Republicans further away) it has been constant over the past 40 to 50 years. None of the six non-economic issues show patterns consistent with the Democratic Proximity Advantage hypothesis (H6).

For the six non-economic issues, in many single election years the Proximity Equality Hypothesis (H2) cannot be rejected with statistical confidence. Across all years H2 appears to be quite an accurate account of *Gay Rights*. Looking beyond specific survey years, on *Abortion*, as discussed above, party elite changes in locations have led to a Republican advantage on the issue. Racial issues—especially *Racial Resentment*—also appear to offer a proximity advantage to Republican party elites. Likewise with *Immigration* and the *Death Penalty*. Thus, there is support for H4 on non-economic issues.

Before turning to the Conclusion, we note two choices in our study's design and the resulting limitations. First, when we estimated the magnitude of party activist movement we focused on the total, whether the overall or per decade quantities. However, as shown in Figure 2 party activist movement does not always proceed in a (near) constant fashion. This is most notable on the *Gay Rights* and *Immigration* issues. Although beyond the bounds of what we could do in this paper, a focus on the timing and rate(s) of change in party activist movement could be explored in future research. Second, in light of spatial theories that emphasize the importance of the median voter we analyzed party activists relative to the preferences of the mass public overall. Another reference point could be non-activist partisans. That is, one could consider how well the preferences of Democratic activists correspond to the preferences of Democratic non-activists. Likewise for Republicans. A shift to this focus could engage another important issue is the study of representation and

democratic accountability, namely whether and to what extent party activists accurately represent or “distort” what ordinary people want (Verba et al., 1995).

Conclusion

The “conventional wisdom” (Broockman & Skovron, 2018, p. 542) that asymmetric polarization characterizes party elites in the United States with Republicans moving to the right more than Democrats have to the left has not received much support in our analyses. Nor has the proposition from the symmetric theory of party elites that there will be little proximity advantage to either party's activists. We have found each party's activists clearly advantaged on some salient issues in American politics. Our results imply that more nuance is necessary to understand party activist positions, changes, and proximity to the public's preferences. In this regard, several considerations strike us as especially important.

First, the patterns found in existing research that have been observed for some party elites—especially elected officials and candidates—are not reproduced for party activists. General claims about changes among political elites therefore need to be qualified with a reference to what type of elites. For example, while the ideological space of legislators and candidates for elective office may be characterized as unidimensional (Bonica, 2014; McCarty et al., 1997, 2006), a multidimensional framework appears necessary for political activists. This is true even for our rarefied definition of activists as comprising roughly the 6% most politically active citizens. Existing work does sometimes analyze activism in a multidimensional space (e.g., Aldrich, 1983a, 1983b; Bartels, 2016; Layman et al., 2010; Miller & Schofield, 2003), but our findings indicate even greater complexity.

It is not merely the case that there are at least three issue dimensions (social welfare, race, and culture), but our results show that there clearly is within-domain variation. This is most notable with respect to the cultural issues of abortion and gay rights. The abortion issue shows the typical pattern of increasing polarization over time, but this is not the case for gay rights. Moreover, while Republican party activists have developed a proximity advantage on abortion, neither party has done so on gay rights. This leads us to think greater attention should be paid to specific issues instead of just issue domains as O'Brian (2020) has done on abortion and Hajnal and collaborators have done on immigration (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015; Hajnal & Rivera, 2014). For example, it is possible that the Democratic activists' proximity disadvantage on racial issues and immigration may reflect racial and ethnic compositional differences in party activist populations.³¹ As such, a within-party activist analysis might be fruitful to distinguish African American, Latinx, and White Democratic party activists in an effort to assess whether there is heterogeneity along racial/ethnic

lines within the Democratic activist stratum of the Democratic party.

On the longstanding divide between the parties on social welfare or economic issues, the persistent proximity advantage of Democratic activists suggests that both parties' dependence on the wealthy may have the asymmetric effects hypothesized in existing research (Bonica et al., 2013; Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Page & Gilens, 2017). While wealthy activists (Democratic and Republican alike) may be more conservative in their social welfare preferences, the effect on Democratic activists is to pull them toward the mass public's preferences, and the effect on Republican activists is to push them away from the public's preferences.

What our results imply is that this is not a new phenomenon brought about by recent changes in the campaign finance system. The Democratic party activist proximity advantage (and the Republican party activist proximity disadvantage) on social welfare issues dates back as far as our data go. Although comparable policy preference data does not extend to the period before 1972, the ANES surveys do include social welfare and economics questions. Therefore in future work it may be possible to assess whether Democratic activists had a proximity advantage on economic issues in the 1960s, and perhaps even the 1950s. In addition, if it is indeed the preferences of campaign donors that drive the activist proximity advantage, then it may be that rather than a combined scale of political activism that includes donating money along with other forms of political activity, separating donors from other political activists may be useful (Brockman & Malhotra, 2020; Verba et al., 1995).

Our findings also shed light on campaign strategies and tactics. With each party having an activist proximity advantage on at least one issue, basic theories of electoral competition predict that campaigns will be fought over agenda control. Especially with the nationalization of parties and decline of candidate-centric elections in the U.S. (Hopkins, 2018), Democratic candidates should attempt to campaign on—and force Republicans to campaign on—social welfare issues. Republicans—whose advantages lie elsewhere—would be better served with a campaign issue agenda focused on other policy areas. While we withhold any judgment on the relative policy significance of economic versus non-economic issues, we do note that the patterns of results we have found do shed insight into why the parties place the emphases on the issues that they do.

Looking toward the future, two of the issues on which the Republicans hold a proximity advantage are also issues on which the proximity advantage appears to be growing—*Aid to Blacks* and *Death Penalty*. With no indication that the growing polarization has abated or even slowed (Figures 1 and 2), we see no reason to predict that these advantages will not continue to grow, at least in the near term. In contrast, while we observe clear and growing activist polarization over time on most other issues, the respective proximity advantages are comparatively stationary or growing smaller.

On issues where there is a persistent proximity advantage, the party that is farther away from the public doesn't appear to be willing or able to move closer to the median voter, despite the electoral benefits that doing so might provide.

Finally, our findings imply that more attention should be paid to the causes of party activist policy locations. Party activists—as a distinct stratum of party elites—are not only important political actors, but as our results make clear they are not responding to the same causal forces as other party elites.³² To be sure, how issues become politicized and produce political activism has been studied (e.g., Carmines & Stimson, 1986, 1989; Schlozman et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). But, there is clearly more work to do. On some issues, like gay rights, social change and generational replacement may be especially important to the process of politicization and (de-)polarization (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Keleher & Smith, 2012). More generally the process of activation may begin locally or at the state level before rising to national prominence (Nicholson, 2005; Schickler, 2016; Smith & Tolbert, 2007). And, the media, through issue framing, may play a role (Baumgartner et al., 2008). What this paper has shown is that the explanation is not likely to be simple and straightforward. Sustained attention to produce an accurate explanation will be necessary.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The research literature on party polarization is immense. For a range of perspectives, assessments, and syntheses see Persily (2015), McCarty and Schickler (2018), and McCarty (2019).
2. That being said, activists are a distinct subset of party elites and our findings can coexist with different patterns found for other strata of political elites.
3. To be sure, Lee (2016) argues for the view that what appears to be a growing ideological divide between the parties is more

a reflection of heightened electoral competition between the parties than a growing ideological divide.

4. More recent research raises the possibility that polarization between the parties on racial issues extends considerably further back in time (Schickler, 2016).
5. The list of plausible causes is long. Surveying the range of possibilities, McCarty (2019, p. 114) observes that:

The polarization of the American political parties is a complex phenomenon with many plausible causes and is influenced by an even larger set of contributing factors. For ultimate causes . . . strong cases can be made for a wide variety of causes ranging from the Southern Realignment to increasing economic inequality and racial/ethnic diversity to the reemergence of strong party competition for the control of the federal government.

6. “To be specific, the DW-NOMINATE scores show that since 1980, the mean Democrat moved 0.20 standard deviations to the left while the mean Republican moved 0.44 standard deviations to the right. In contrast, the CFscores show a near reversal in which the mean Democrat moved 0.50 standard deviations to the left while the Republicans moved 0.31 standard deviations to the right” (Bonica, 2014, p. 379).
7. See Supplemental Appendix Table SA1 for a tabular synthesis of the research on party activists, party polarization, and (a) symmetric polarization.
8. “Lawmakers may well reject ‘half a loaf’ and settle for nothing, if taking the half would be understood by constituents or denounced by important groups or activists as an unacceptable sellout. Pundits today call this a fear of being ‘primaried,’ although the *electoral imperative to satisfy activist constituencies* has deep roots in congressional politics” (Binder & Lee, 2015, p. 255, emphasis added).
9. Layman et al. (2010) primarily focuses on issue consistency but does report party change by issue. In 1972, the percentages of Republican delegates with conservative positions on economic, cultural, and racial issues were 31%, 42%, and 77%, respectively. The corresponding figures for Republican delegates in 2004 were 71%, 70%, and 80%. Among Democratic delegates in 1972, the percentages holding liberal opinions on economic, cultural, and racial issues were 77%, 82%, and 74%, respectively. In 2004, the figures were 98%, 91%, and 79% (Layman et al., 2010, p. 332).
10. To preview some findings, we find a growing proximity advantage for Republican activists on governmental aid to blacks while Saunders and Abramowitz (2004) finds Republican activists to be slightly more distant than their Democratic counterparts from the mass public’s preferences.
11. Additionally, existing research on party polarization among party elites rarely takes into account the location of mass public. As a result, many studies only assess whether there has been asymmetric *absolute* movement. They cannot assess how party elites have moved *relative* to the preferences of the mass public. This is important as demonstrated in our analyses below.
12. The empirical example of *Abortion*, analyzed below, illustrates this point.
13. As Bonica et al. (2013, p. 113) puts it:

Democrats as well as Republicans rely on big donors. . . . The relative proportions of funds raised by Democrats from the top 0.01% and from organized labor provide a telling comparison. The top 0.01%, whose donations had been roughly on par with those of labor during 1980s and early 1990s, outspent labor by more than a 4:1 margin during the 2012 election cycle. While it is difficult to gauge the effect of the Democrats’ reliance on contributions from the wealthy, it does likely preclude a strong focus on redistributive policies.

14. In light of the issue-specific accounts of elite politics, H5 & H6 may apply (more) to some issues than to others.
15. The data are publicly available: <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/anes-time-series-cumulative-data-file/>. We use the 9/10/2019 version.
16. It is worth noting that including midterm years does nothing to alter the patterns of results in the time period during which midterm surveys were conducted.
17. The approximately 94% of the remaining respondents constitute the non-activist, or mass public, and when we measure the location of activists relative to the public, it is the mean of these respondents’ preferences to which we refer.
18. See Table SA3 in the Supplemental Appendix for a list of all policy items used in our analysis and the years in which they were included in the ANES surveys.
19. For example, to impute government services values for 1972, we estimated a regression model of opinion on government services with the items asking about jobs and health care from the years in which all three questions were asked. Then, using the parameter estimates from the regression and respondents’ opinions on jobs and health care in 1972, we computed predicted/imputed values of government services preferences in 1972. As we explain below, to address how this (and other factors) add to the uncertainty of our estimates, we employ a bootstrapping procedure.
20. Before combining the three items into a single scale, in preliminary analyses we analyzed each item separately and found similar patterns of results. Also of note concerning these items is that the scales are anchored by specific, absolute policy options. This stands in contrast to the *Federal Spending* items (below) whose response options are implicitly relative to the existing levels of spending.
21. First we regress the old version of abortion policy preferences on the new version and use the estimates to produce predicted values for respondents not asked the old version. Then we regress the new on the old and use those estimates to produce predicted values for respondents not asked the new question. Finally, for each respondent we average their reported/predicted answers to produce the measure of abortion policy preferences in our analyses.
22. There are four items used to create the *Racial Resentment* scale. One asks about slavery and discrimination have made it difficult for blacks to succeed. Another asks whether blacks should overcome prejudice without special favors. A third asks whether it is the case that blacks have to try harder to succeed. And the last asks whether blacks have gotten less than they deserve. Like the other scales, we create the *Racial Resentment* scale by coding all the items to range from 0 (most conservative response) to 1 (most liberal response) and then average them.

23. To measure partisanship we classify people who identify with one of the parties or “lean” toward one of the parties as partisans (Keith et al., 1992).
24. Gilens (2005, 2012) uses this approach to estimate the preferences of the wealthy and relies on a quadratic specification for the relationship between income and preferences. In preliminary analyses we compared linear and quadratic specifications and found no improvement in fit with the quadratic one so we rely on a linear specification.
25. We also considered an alternative approach of defining activists as those who engaged in at least three (instead of four) activities and then computing means (instead of estimating the regression). As shown in the Supplemental Appendix, the patterns of results were the same. We prefer our approach because with the more generous definition the number of activists more than doubles to about 15%, which stretches the link between concept (activists as one type of party elites) and measure.
26. The level of party activist polarization is: $(d_{jy} - m_{jy}) - (r_{jy} - m_{jy}) = d_{jy} - d_{jy}$.
27. The non-parametric bootstrap also accounts for the usual uncertainty from relying on a sample of respondents from a desired population.
28. For examples of using this method in political science research see, for example, Bartels (1996) and Peress (2013).
29. Specifically let $y=1$ for the first year data are available for a policy j and $y=2$ for the last year data are available. Then, using the loess estimates we compute party activist change. For example, for Democratic activists: $\left| (d_{j2} - m_{j2}) - (d_{j1} - m_{j1}) \right| = |d_{j2} - d_{j1} + m_{j1} - m_{j2}|$.
30. $\left(\frac{.02 \text{ total asymmetric change}}{44 \text{ years}} \right) * 10 = .005 \text{ asymmetric change per decade}$.
31. On the importance of compositional differences on the “God Gap,” see Claassen (2015).
32. Or, they are not responding to the same causal forces in the same ways.

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Author Biographies

Samuel Collitt is a PhD candidate in political science at UC Davis who conducts research in American politics, public opinion, and climate change politics. Before attending UC Davis he attended The Pennsylvania State University where he received a BS degree in earth science and policy.

Benjamin Highton is a professor of political science at UC Davis who teaches and conducts research in the areas of American politics, public opinion, elections, and research methods. Before joining the Davis faculty he was an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow and worked in the office of Senator Paul Wellstone, where he specialized in education and welfare policy.

Supplemental Appendix

Table SA1 categorizes previous research on activists and (a)symmetric polarization. Table SA2 reports the distribution of political activity by year and shows that while there is some variation there is clearly more year-to-year stability. Table SA3 identifies the policy items analyzed in the paper and their variable numbers in the *ANES Cumulative Data File*. Table SA4 provides the estimates on which Figure 3 is based (see main text for details). Figure SA1 compares the results using our preferred measure and estimate technique (described in the main text) to an alternative of defining activists as those who engaged in at least 3 (instead of 4) activities and then computing means (instead of estimating the regression). As shown, the patterns of results are the same with larger confidence intervals when the latter approach is used.

Table SA1
Research on Activists and (A)symmetric Polarization

Focus	Studies	Relevant findings
The role of party activists in the party system	Aldrich, 1983a, 1983b; Carmines & Stimson 1986, 1989; Carmines & Woods, 2002; Carmines & Wagner, 2006; Bawn et al., 2012; Miller & Schofield, 2003, 2008; Schofield & Miller, 2007; Claassen, 2015; Lupton, Myers & Thorton, 2017; Layman et al., 2006, 2010; Carsey & G.C. Layman 1999; Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Karol, 2009; Masket, 2009	Party activists link party leaders with the mass public and non-activist copartisans by pulling leaders toward them, by amplifying and signaling the positions taken by leaders to the public, and by leading the way in adopting those positions.
Polarization consequences of party activism	Aldrich, 1983a, 1983b; M. P. Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams, 2009; M. P. Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams & Jeremy C. Pope, 2011; Grossman & Hopkins, 2016; Bonica, McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2013; Grossman & Hopkins, 2016; Hacker & Pierson, 2014, 2015; Klein, 2020; G. C. Layman et al., 2010; Lelkes & Sniderman, 2016	Party activists contribute to symmetric (implicitly or explicitly) elite partisan polarization. Party activists contribute to asymmetric elite partisan polarization.
Contributing factors in Republican elite-led asymmetric polarization	Bartels, 2016; Bailey et al., 2012; Layman et al., 2010; Grossman & Hopkins, 2015, 2016; Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Wilcox & Larson, 2006; Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011 Grossman & Hopkins, 2015, 2016; Lupton et al., 2017; Freeman, 1986	There has been more partisan activism that occurs in the Republican party than in the Democratic party, such as the rises of the Christian Right and the Tea Party movement, and the decline of unions. The parties have different structures and cultures, whereby the Republican party is more hierarchical and ideological, and the Democratic party is more group-conflict-centric.
Party activist polarization	Broockman & Malhotra, 2020; Bonica et al., 2013; Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Page & Gilens, 2017 Carmines & Woods, 2002; G.C. Layman & Carsey 1998; G. C. Layman et al., 2006 Layman et al. 2010; Saunders & Abramowitz 2004	Party donors tend to be more conservative on economic issues, so that Democratic candidates are incentivized to moderate on these issues while Republican candidates are free to be more extreme. The policy positions of party activists have polarized symmetrically over time and they are equally distant from the absolute ideological center. These studies do not assess for the possibility of asymmetric polarization. Republican activists have become more conservative over time than Democratic activists have become more liberal, so that Republican activists are more conservative than Democratic activists are liberal.

Table SA2
Distribution of Political Activity, 1972-2016

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Political Activities</u>				
	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4+</u>
1972	22	41	21	9	7
1976	21	38	26	9	6
1980	21	42	25	6	5
1984	21	43	24	7	5
1988	26	42	21	7	5
1992	19	41	26	8	5
1996	23	46	21	6	4
2000	20	43	25	6	5
2004	16	34	30	13	8
2008	17	34	29	12	8
2012	17	39	28	9	7
2016	15	36	32	11	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>6</i>

Notes: Cell entries report the percentages of respondents who engaged in the indicated number of political activities by year and overall. See main text for details on the political activities included in the scale.

Table SA3
Policy Items by Year

Variable	ANES CDF variable	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
<i>Abortion</i>	VCF0837/VCF0838	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Gay Rights (scale)</i>													
Jobs	VCF0876a					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Military	VCF0877a						X	X	X	X	X	X	
Adoption	VCF0878						X		X	X	X	X	X
<i>Safety Net (scale)</i>													
Health	VCF0806	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Jobs	VCF0809	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Services	VCF0839				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Federal Spending (scale)</i>													
Poor	VCF0886						X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Childcare	VCF0887					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Public schools	VCF0890				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Welfare	VCF0894						X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Environment	VCF9047				X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
<i>Aid to Blacks</i>	VCF0830	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Racial Resentment</i>	VCF9039-9042					X	X		X	X	X	X	X
<i>Immigration</i>	VCF0879a						X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Death Penalty</i>	NA					X	X		X	X	X	X	X

Note: The ANES question about the death penalty is not included in the CDF file. We retrieved it from the biennial surveys and appended it to the CDF data

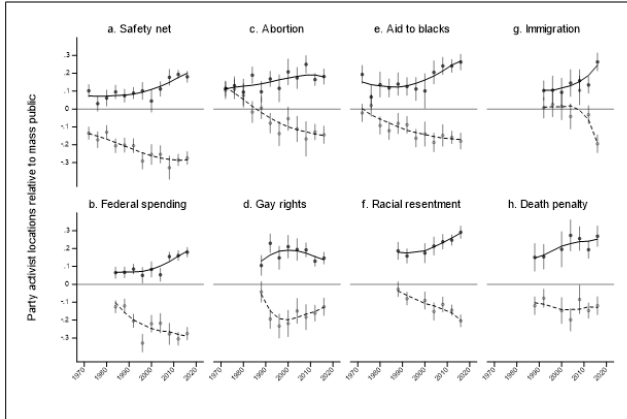
Table SA4
Change in Party Activist Locations

<u>Issue</u>	<u>T₁</u>	<u>T₂</u>	<u>T₂-T₁</u>	<u>Democratic Change (ΔD)</u>	<u>Republican Change (ΔR)</u>	<u>Difference (ΔD - ΔR)</u>	<u>Difference per Decade</u>
Safety net	1972	2016	44	+ .13 (.02)	- .15 (.02)	- .02 (.03)	- .005 (.006)
Federal spending	1984	2016	32	.12 (.02)	- .19 (.02)	- .07 (.03)	- .022 (.009)
Abortion	1972	2016	44	.07 (.02)	- .27 (.03)	- .20 (.04)	- .047 (.009)
Gay rights	1988	2016	28	.01 (.03)	- .07 (.03)	- .05 (.04)	- .017 (.013)
Aid to blacks	1972	2016	44	.12 (.03)	- .17 (.03)	- .06 (.04)	- .013 (.009)
Racial resentment	1988	2016	28	.11 (.02)	- .16 (.02)	- .06 (.03)	- .020 (.012)
Immigration	1992	2016	24	.14 (.04)	- .20 (.03)	- .06 (.05)	- .026 (.020)
Death penalty	1988	2016	28	.11 (.04)	- .03 (.03)	.07 (.05)	.026 (.017)

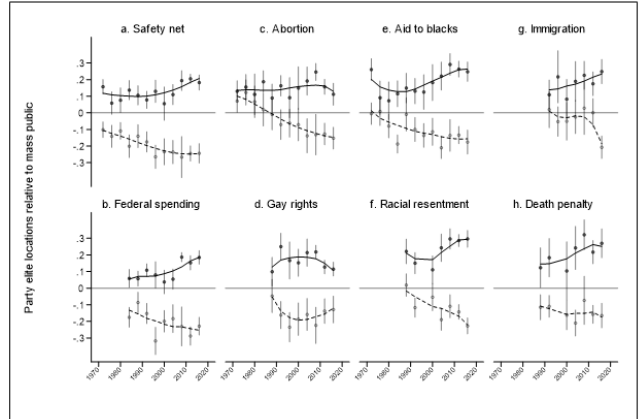
Notes: See main text for descriptions of how party elite change was computed. The final column reports the normalized (by decade) difference in party elite change: $\frac{|\Delta D| - |\Delta R|}{T_2 - T_1} * 10$. Bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses.

Figure SA1 Alternative Measures and Estimates

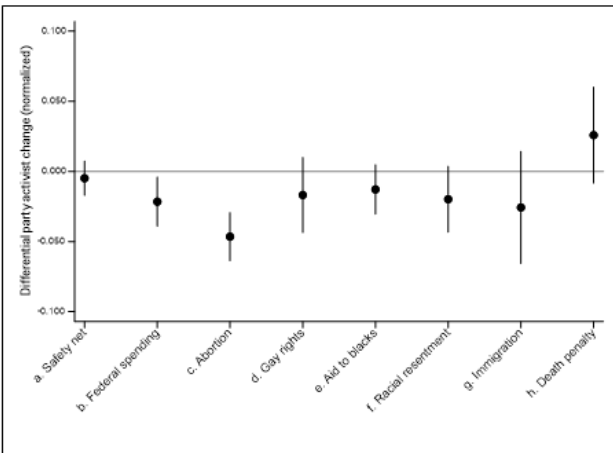
A. Figure 2 from main text



B. Figure 2 with alternative measure



C. Figure 3 from main text



D. Figure 3 with alternative measure

