Polarization Eh? Ideological Divergence and Partisan Sorting in the Canadian Mass Public

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Abstract

There has be increasing concern among commentators and scholars about a possible polarization of the Canadian public that resembles what we have seen in the United States. There are, however, multiple competing conceptual definitions and perspectives on polarization, and we do not yet have a full and complete picture on which dimensions Canadians have or have not polarized, nor on the magnitudes of any patterns. This paper uses the 1993-2019 cumulative file of the Canadian Election Study (CES) to measure trends in *ideological divergence*, *ideological consistency*, and *partisan sorting* in the Canadian mass public. It finds little evidence that Canadians are becoming more ideologically polarized. They are, however, becoming modestly more ideologically consistent and much more sorted – that is, partisanship, ideological identification, and policy beliefs are increasingly interconnected, particularly among those with high levels of political interest. This paper also provides some evidence as to the mechanism undergirding partisan sorting using the 2004-2008 CES panel. Partisan sorting appears to be driven by people switching their partisanship into closer alignment with their beliefs rather than vice versa. These findings call for additional research on the causes and consequences of partisan sorting in Canada and further efforts to situate these results in a comparative context.

Over the last few years there has been increasing attention among commentators and scholars alike that Canadians are in the grips of a polarization epidemic. Akaash Maharaj, CEO of the Mosaic Institute, for instance, claims that "The moderate middle has largely disappeared. Increasingly, political rhetoric is used to incite rage against opponents and fear of electing another party."[1] The common refrain is that partisans of the major parties increasingly hate their political opposites, and the result has been increasing incivility and hostility in Canadian politics by political elites and citizens alike. As Susan Delacourt of the *Toronto Star* commented on CBC Radio, "People are . . . absolutely convinced that they're right and everybody else is absolutely wrong. . . . The middle is the scariest place to be in Canadian politics."[2] Moderation and the spirit of compromise appear to be on the wane, with ideology and partisan hatred filling their place.

At least some of this concern is spurred by the clear trends towards polarization found in the United States. Scholars are in consensus that political elites in the United States have polarized (McCarty et al., 2006), and that partisans are becoming more ideologically distinct (Levendusky, 2009b). This is known as *partisan sorting*. At the same time, Americans do not appear to be getting more ideologically extreme (Fiorina & Abrams, 2012) – or there is, at best, a small trend in that direction confined to partisans (Lelkes, 2016). There is also agreement that Americans are *affectively polarizing* where Republicans and Democrats increasingly dislike each other and their parties (Iyengar et al., 2010). The rise of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have each drawn attention to this phenomenon south of the border.

Canadian scholarship has been slower to examine these processes. There is clear evidence that Canadians are becoming affectively polarized. Conservative supporters have increasingly come to dislike the Liberals, while NDP and Liberal partisans have begun to feel the same about the Conservative Party (Cochrane, 2015; Johnston, 2019). The negative affect Canadian feel towards out-parties also spills over to evaluations of out-party supporters as well (Bridgman et al., 2020). Attitudes towards redistribution are also becoming increasingly correlated with partisanship and vote choice, which is indicative of partisan sorting (Kevins & Soroka, 2018). But we have not yet had a full accounting of the scale and scope of the polarization phenomenon in Canada.

This paper has two objectives. First, I provide a comprehensive accounting of the degree of polarization in the Canadian public using the cumulative file of the Canadian Election Study (CES). Setting aside affective polarization, which has been covered elsewhere, I make a distinction between the gravitation of citizens to the ideological poles (*ideological divergence*) and the increasing alignment of policy beliefs, ideological identification, and partisanship (*ideological alignment*), the latter of which manifests in some combination of higher levels of *ideological consistency* (i.e. correlations between issue positions) and *partisan sorting* (i.e. correlations between partisanship and policy beliefs or ideology). I show that there is little evidence that Canadians are diverging ideologically – that is, they are not becoming more polarized. They are, however, becoming modestly more consistent in their ideological beliefs and much more sorted. Left-right ideology is intertwined with partisanship to a degree that is unprecedented in Canadian history.

[1] https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/jan/20/canadas-political-polarization-rises-kills-image-m/
[2] https://thewalrus.ca/democracy-is-canada-broken/

Second, I use the 2004-2008 CES panel study to shed light on the mechanism undergirding partisan sorting. Prior research in the United States suggests that individuals switch their beliefs and ideological identification to better match their partisanship (Levendusky, 2009b). I likewise find that people are much more likely to switch their beliefs and ideological identification between 2004 and 2008 than their partisanship. However, I find that partisan sorting is driven primarily by people switching their partisanship in that time frame.

I begin by outlining the conceptual differences between ideological divergence and alignment as they relate to polarization and review the evidence for both in the Canadian, American, and comparative contexts. I then outline the measures I construct to evaluate ideological divergence, ideological consistency, and partisan sorting, and describe the time varying descriptive results. Finally, I provide evidence as to the mechanism undergirding partisan sorting in Canada.

Ideological divergence vs. ideological alignment

When scholars speak of polarization in a general sense they may be referring to several conceptually and empirically distinct concepts. Fiorina and his colleagues argue that the most relevant concept here is *ideological divergence* or *polarization* – the clustering of citizens on left-right ideological poles (Fiorina et al., 2005; Fiorina & Levendusky 2006; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Fiorina et al., 2008; Levendusky, 2009a). Observing an increase in the bimodality of ideological self-placement or policy-based measures of left-right ideology over time is evidence of such a process. I refer to this form of polarization as *ideological divergence* for the remainder of the paper. Ideological divergence is perhaps most closely associated with polarization as discussed in popular discourse – the increasing ideological extremity of citizens.

Abramowitz and other scholars see polarization through the lens of *ideological alignment* where partisanship, ideology, and issue preferences have become increasingly correlated *irrespective of whether or not citizens are becoming more ideologically extreme* (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005, 2008; Abramowitz, 2010). There are typically two dimensions of this process. First, *ideological consistency* is where issues preferences become more internally consistent over time and thus more highly correlated (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005, 2008; Abramowitz, 2010; Hare & Poole, 2014). Second, *partisan sorting* is where policy beliefs and ideology increasingly map onto partisanship (Abramowitz, 2010; Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006; Levendusky, 2009b). Consistency is typically measured by examining changes in the strength of correlations between issue positions, while partisan sorting is evidenced by growing ideological dissimilarity between partisan groups and increasing correlations between ideology and policy beliefs on the one hand, and partisanship on the other.

It is important to reinforce the conceptual difference here between ideological divergence and alignment. Canadians can match their ideology and partisanship without necessarily becoming more ideologically extreme. Switching partisanship to match policy beliefs or ideology does nothing to increase levels of ideological divergence, nor does switching one's position from left to right or vice versa at the same level of extremity. Conversely, individuals can move to the ideological poles without increasing their sorting if they fail to match those beliefs to their partisanship. As sorting intensifies, it is possible ideological divergence will result as well (Levendusky, 2009b), as we have

seen in the United States to a small degree (Lelkes, 2016; Levendusky, 2009a), but at moderate levels of sorting, it is quite possible to have had no ideological divergence.

These nuances matter. It turns out that the scale and scope of polarization depends on the measure used and the population of interest. There is relatively little evidence of ideological divergence in the American mass public (Fiorina & Abrams, 2012). Measures of ideology informed by policy issue questions and self-placement items remain largely unimodal in their distributions and have not changed much over time, though there is some evidence of modest divergence among partisans (Lelkes, 2016). There is more evidence of increasing ideological consistency. Americans are more likely to give consistently liberal and conservative answers to policy questions. There are also stronger correlations between policy items. These findings are much stronger among politically-engaged partisans (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Hare & Poole, 2014).

Perhaps most importantly there is a general consensus that Americans have become more sorted in their beliefs such that there is a stronger relationship between ideology and policy beliefs on the one hand, and partisanship on the other (Levendusky, 2009b). In fact, the correlation between partisanship and ideology 7-point scales in the American National Election Study have doubled since the 1970s (Lelkes, 2016). In short, there is limited evidence of ideological divergence in the American mass public, some indication of increased ideological consistency, and conclusive evidence of partisan sorting.

Far less literature has focused on whether such polarizing trends have occurred north of the border. Early work in Canadian public opinion emphasized differences between Canada and the United States on a number of different domains (Adams, 2003). The core intuition was that Canada and the United States were founded in diametrically opposing ways, with lasting implications for not just institutions, but public opinion as well (Horowitz, 1966; Lipset, 1990). Previous scholarship has also argued that Canadian partisanship may be much more unstable and much less predictive than in the United States (Elkins, 1978; LeDuc et al., 1984). This early consensus, however, has been strongly challenged. For example, there are reasons to suspect differences in stability between American and Canadian partisanship are largely a methodological artefact (Blais et al., 2001; Green et al., 2002; Johnston, 2006). And many scholars now highlight the importance of partisanship in Canadian vote choice (Anderson & Stephenson, 2010; Medeiros & Noël, 2014; Nevitte et al., 2000) and opinion formation (Merolla et al. 2008, 2016).

Canada may be more similar to the United States than we might expect as it pertains to mass polarization. This is especially true since the phenomenon most commonly associated with polarization in the United States is also on the rise in Canada as well: elite polarization. America's political parties have sharply diverged in their voting patterns over the past 40 years (McCarty et al., 2006), which began over racial issues in the 1970s (Carmines & Stimson, 1989) and extended to cultural issues in the 1980s and 1990s (Layman, 2001). Over the same time period, Canada's parties likewise diverged. Once having had a long tradition of electoral dominance by non-ideological brokerage parties (Carty et al., 2001; Johnston, 2017), Canada's two major parties began to polarize in the 1980s, only exacerbated by the rise of the Reform Party in the 1990s (Cochrane, 2010, 2015). The emerging ideological nature of the parties is also reflected in the attitudes of its members (Cross & Young, 2010). The old brokerage model of politics no longer holds quite as well in Canada. There

is no consensus yet on the causes of ideological divergence and alignment in the United States, but the finger is pointed most often at political elites, since public opinion is often responses to cues from these figures (Levendusky, 2009b; Zaller, 1992). This may well be true in Canada as well.

Unfortunately, empirical research establishing the scale and scope of ideological polarization, ideological consistency, and partisan sorting in Canada is limited. There is some evidence that Canadians have become better sorted in their policy positions. Kevins and Soroka (2018) find that vote choice and partisanship have become increasingly correlated with policy-based questions on redistribution. This is in line with findings in the United States, but stands in contrast to research done in the UK (Adams et al., 2012a), Dutch (Adams et al., 2012b), and German contexts (Munzert & Bauer, 2013). It does not, however, appear that Canadians have become more ideologically polarized (Johnston, 2014). Johnston's analysis, however, relies on left-right self-placement rather than issue-based measures, while Kevin & Soroka's (2018) work use a limited set of policy questions in the Canadian Election Study. This paper builds on these works by marshalling evidence on ideological polarization, ideological consistency, and partisan sorting in Canada.

Data and Methods

I measure ideological divergence and alignment using the cumulative file of the CES, which is the only available option that allows us to understand over time opinion change in the Canadian mass public. I describe my measures for ideological divergence, ideological consistency, and partisan sorting in turn.

Ideological divergence

A world characterized by ideological divergence is one in which Canadians move towards more extreme left-wing or right-wing ideological identification and policy beliefs, such that their distributions become increasingly bimodal. We might also anticipate the adoption of increasingly extreme attitudes on specific policies, resulting in more dispersed distributions.

Perhaps the most straightforward option is to examine the distribution of the 0-10 left-right ideological self-placement scale. This question was asked first in the 1997 CES, and then from 2004 onward. However, this question is insufficient in shedding light on ideology on its own. These questions tap into ideological *identity* rather than policy-based ideology. There is often a fair amount of slippage between the policies people support and the ideology they claim to possess. Many voters in the United States, for example, claim symbolic conservative ideology, while adhering to operationally liberal policy beliefs (Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017).

The Canadian Election Study contains a number of broad policy questions that can also be used to evaluate levels of both ideological divergence and alignment in the Canadian public. I have identified eight questions that have been asked consistently since the 1993 election study. Although the questions themselves have remained constant, with one exception, the placement of the questions have sometimes varied between the campaign period survey, the post-election survey, and the mail back survey. There was also a substantial change in the survey mode by 2015 with the integration of a web-based component.

- We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country

- Too many immigrants just don't want to fit into Canadian society
- The government should do more to reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor
- Protecting the environment is more important than creating jobs
- Heterosexual couples should be allowed to legally marry[3]
- People who don't get ahead should blame themselves, not the system
- The government should: see to it that everyone has a decent standard of living; leave people to get ahead on their own
- Do you think Canada should admit more immigrants, fewer immigrants, or about the same as now?

I use exploratory factory analysis to identify dimensions that run through these eight questions. For the most part, they load on two factors that approximate attitudes towards social and economic policy. I used the factor analysis to generate per-respondent predictions for each factor.

I use two strategies to evaluate the degree of ideological divergence. First, I examine the average standard deviation of responses to the eight policy issue questions. This tells us whether responses to these policy items are becoming more dispersed over time on average. Second, I calculate the bimodality coefficient of both the ideological self-placement measure, and the two dimensions of ideology uncovered by the factor analysis. The bimodality coefficient (BC) is calculated as follows:

$$BC = \frac{s^2 + 1}{k + 3 * \frac{(n-1)^2}{(n-2)(n-3)}}$$

where *s* represents the skewness of the distribution, *k* refers to its kurtosis and *n* is the sample size. A BC of 1 indicates a completely bimodal distribution, while a score of 0 indicates a completely unimodal distribution.

Ideological consistency

The policy items identified above can also be used to measure levels of ideological consistency as well. First, I recoded each of these items to indicate left-wing (-1), right-wing (1), or neutral responses (0) and created a measure of policy-based ideology (-8 to 8). I folded this scale for a measure of ideological consistency. Higher scores on this measure indicate Canadians are becoming more ideologically consistent in their beliefs. Second, we can observe whether the average correlation between these items has gone up over time (0 to 1).

Partisan sorting

Partisan sorting can be evaluated a number of different ways. I use two different approaches – one situated at the aggregate-level, and the other at the individual-level. First, I measure of distinctiveness of the ideological distributions of different groups of partisans. In the United States this is straightforward – you compare the distributions of Democrats and Republicans. Here I take

[3] This question was omitted in the 2019 Canadian Election Study. It was replaced with a question asking respondents how much they think should be done for gay and lesbians (much more to much less, 5-pont). Nonetheless, the 2019 results should be treated with caution as it is not directly comparable.

into account the multi-party context. I calculate the distinctiveness of ideological self-placement, policy-based ideology, and each of the ideological dimensions identified from the factor analysis for Liberal, NDP, and Conservative partisans. Partisan sorting would lead us to expect increasing ideological distinctiveness between Liberal and NDP partisan on the one hand, and Conservative partisans on the other.

In order to evaluate the ideological distinctiveness of partisans of the three major parties I use the distinctiveness coefficient (DC), following Levendusky and Pope (2011) and Lelkes (2016):[4]

$$DC = 1/2 \int_{-\infty}^{+\infty} |f(x) - d(x)| dx,$$

Where f(x) represents the distribution of ideology for one group of partisans, and d(x) represents the distribution for the other group. In these case there will be three pairs of partisan groupings (Liberals and Conservatives, Liberals and NDP, and NDP and Conservatives). A DC of 1 indicates completely distinct distributions, while 0 represents perfect overlap. We should observe higher DCs for the Liberal-Conservative, and NDP-conservative pairings.

Second, I construct an individual-level measure of partisan sorting. This measure increases by 1 for every left-wing response given by Liberal and NDP partisans and decreases by 1 for every right-wing response given. The reverse is true for partisans of the Conservative Party and its legacies (i.e. the PCs, Reform, and Alliance). Respondents are given a score of 0 if they have an equal number of left and right-wing beliefs or worse, and then increment upward by one as they become more sorted, such that the most sorted partisans give 8 consistently right-wing or left-wing responses depending on their partisanship.

Results

There is little evidence that Canadians are diverging ideologically. Panel A of Figure 1 shows that, on average, the dispersion of responses to my eight policy items has, if anything, *decreased* over time, dropping from 0.36 to 0.32. In other words, responses to the CES questions asked continuously from 1993 to 2019 have become slightly more concentrated. Now it is possible that certain subsets of respondents may have become more polarized in their answers even if the broader public has not. For instance, partisans with high levels of political interest could have become more polarized since they are more attuned to elite debate. This is not the case, however, as the average standard deviation for high interest partisans has also dropped, in this case from 0.37 to 0.34. There is no evidence that individual policy attitudes are becoming more polarized. If anything, they are becoming *less* so.

This striking null finding is also found when using ideological self-placement. The bimodality coefficients are plotted in panel B of Figure 1. There is no evidence whatsoever of increasing polarization in ideological identity. The BC remains relatively flat among all respondents between 1997 and 2019 (0.16 vs. 0.18) and among high interest partisans (0.18 vs. 0.19). It is also worth noting the baseline as well – a score of 0.18 indicates a highly unimodal distribution. This finding is also at odds with the United States where the bimodality coefficient is higher (i.e. 0.25, albeit with a

[4] They use the overlap coefficient, which is simply 1-DC.

7-point self-placement scale) and has been increasing over time, at least among partisans (Lelkes, 2016). Canadians are less ideologically polarized than Americans, in line with past research (Gibbins & Nevitte, 1985).

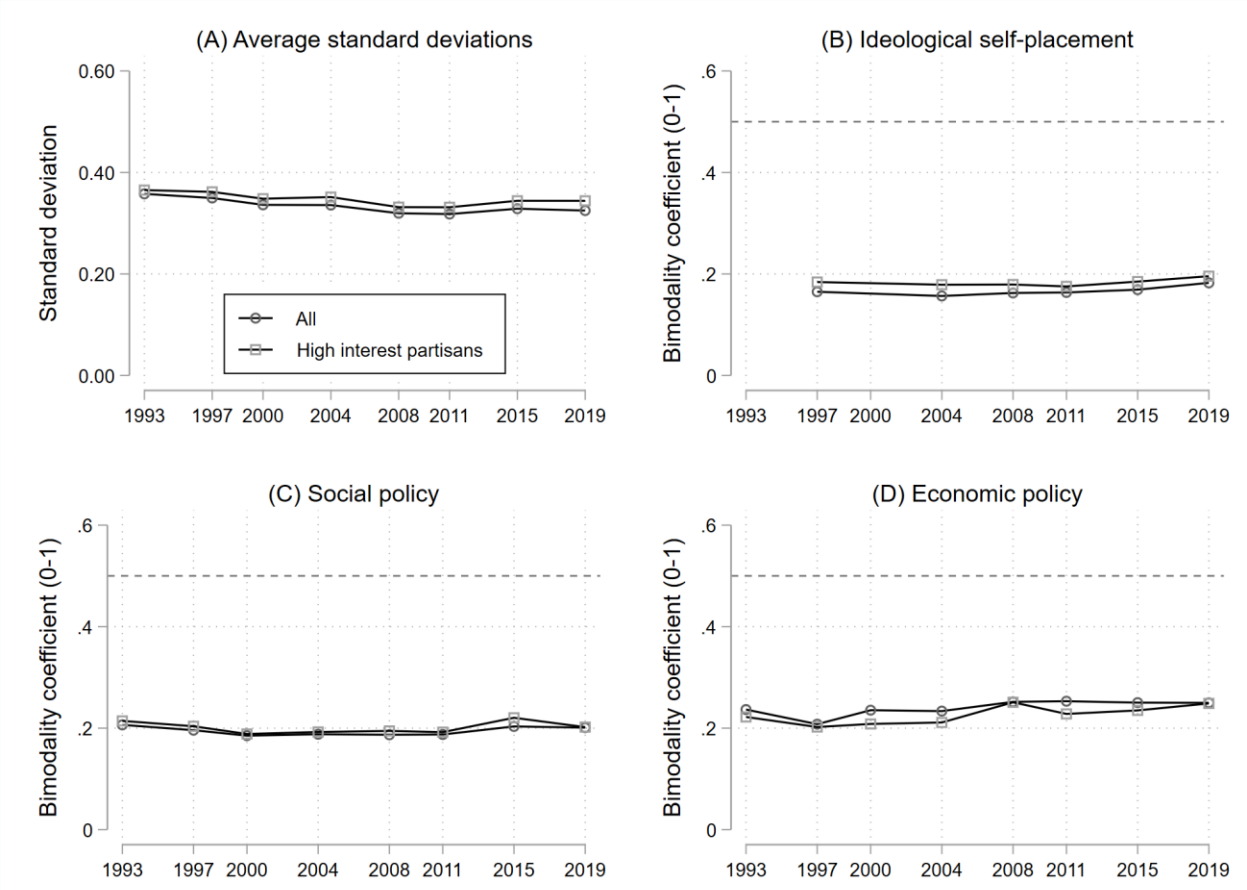

Figure 1. Ideological polarization in the Canadian Election Study; A) Average standard deviations; Bimodality of B) ideological self-placement; C) social policy attitudes; D) economic policy attitudes.

The above analysis cannot rule out divergence in people's beliefs, perhaps exclusive to certain policy dimensions. This might be lost when using a simple left-right self-placement scale. I plot the bimodality coefficients for the social and economic ideological dimensions identified by the factor analysis in panels C and D. Once again there is little evidence of polarization. The social policy line is completely flat. There is virtually no difference in the bimodality between 1993 and 2019 for all respondents (0.21 vs. 0.20) and high interest partisans (0.21 vs. 0.20). There has been some increase in economic policy bimodality for high interest partisans (0.22 vs 0.25), but the series bounces around considerably such that it is difficult to identify a trend.

All told, there is little evidence that Canadians are ideological polarized, nor any indication that they are polarizing. Canadians – even partisans with high levels of political interest – are broadly centrist in their orientations, and show no sign of becoming more ideological extreme.

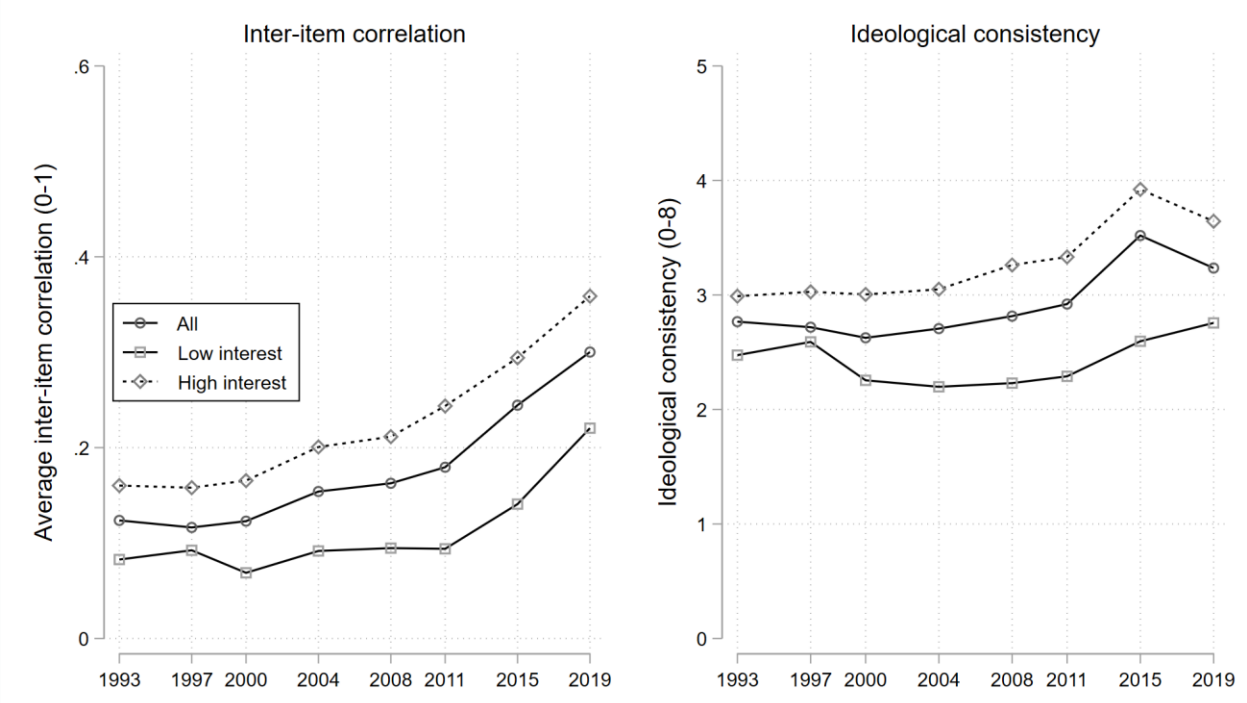

Figure 2. Consistency and constraint in the Canadian Election Study: average inter-item correlation (left); ideological consistency (right).

Ideological consistency

Canadians are not becoming more divergent in their ideological beliefs, but they do appear to be more consistent in these beliefs. The average correlation between the eight issue questions in the CES has increase 2.5 times from 0.12 in 1993 to 0.3 in 2019. This pattern is much stronger for those with higher levels of political interest (0.16 in 1993 to 0.36 in 2019) compared to those with low levels of interest (0.08 in 1993 vs. 0.22 in 2019. These results are shown in the left panel of Figure 2.

Canadians are also much more likely to answer in a consistently left-wing or right-wing direction. Respondents gave 2.8 more conservative (liberal) than liberal (conservative) responses in 1993 (on a 0-8 scale of consistency). This increased by 14% to 3.2 by 2019. These results are shown in the right panel of Figure 2. Again, this trend is stronger among those with high levels of political interest (3 in 1993 vs. 3.6 in 2019) compared to their less interested counterparts (2.5 in 1993 vs. 2.7 in 2019). Canadians are now much more consistent and constrained in their policy beliefs, particularly for those who are most attentive to politics.

Partisan sorting

There is even stronger evidence of partisan sorting in the Canadian public. Panel A of Figure 3 plots the dissimilarity coefficient for left-right ideological self-placement. Liberal and Conservative partisans have becoming increasingly dissimilar. Their DC has increased 113%, from 0.23 in 1997 to 0.49 in 2019. Meanwhile the Liberal and NDP partisans converged, with their DC dropping by 46%, from 0.35 to 0.19. NDP and Conservative partisans have stayed relatively dissimilar in their

ideological self-placements. It is worth noting that the ideological dissimilarity between Conservatives and NDP exceeds that of Republicans and Democrats, while the dissimilarity between Liberals and Conservatives is fast approaching that mark (see Lelkes, 2016 for comparison).

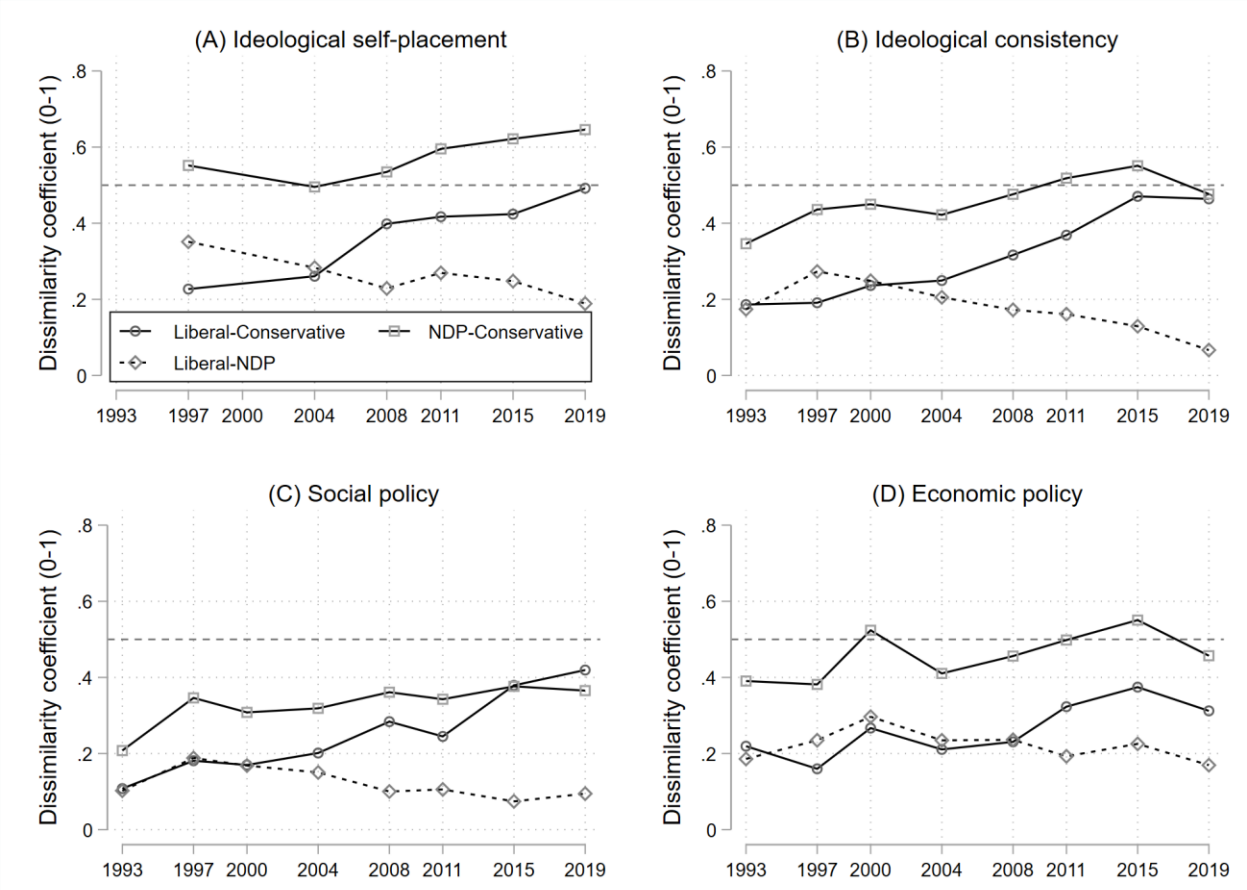

Figure 3. Partisan dissimilarity in the Canadian Election Study; A) Ideological self-placement; B) policy-based ideology; C) social policy; D) economic policy.

The same core finding emerges when looking at a measure of policy-based ideology, which ranges from -8 to 8 based on the consistency of their responses in a left or right-wing direction. Here, there appears to be an increasing divide between both the NDP and Liberals, on one hand, and Conservatives on the other. The DC for the NDP and Conservatives has gone up 37%, from 0.35 in 1993 to 0.48 in 2019, while the DC for the Liberals and Conservatives has increased by 149% over the same span, from 0.19 to 0.46. In contrast, the DC for the Liberals and NDP has dropped 58%, from 0.17 to 0.07. It is clear that both policy-based ideology and ideological identity are increasingly associated with partisanship, such that we see increasing dissimilarity between partisans of the NDP and Liberals on the one hand and the Conservatives, on the other.

The ideological consistency measure used here weights all issue questions equally, irrespective of whether they are anchored on the social or economic ideological dimensions. It is possible that sorting may be driven by a particular dimension. Panels C and D below plot the DCs using the social

and economic ideology dimensions that emerged from the factor analysis. The core pattern remains intact within each ideological dimension, though it is stronger for social policy. The DC for the social policy dimension increased by 71% for the NDP and Conservatives, from 0.21 to 0.36, and by 281% for the Liberals and Conservatives, from 0.11 to 0.42. The Liberals and the NDP have converged modestly from an already low baseline, with their DC dropping 53%, from 0.19 in 1997 to 0.07 in 2019.

On economic policy we also see increasing dissimilarity between the NDP and Conservatives, with the DC jumping 18%, from 0.39 in 1993 to 0.46 in 2019. Liberal partisans are also increasingly dissimilar from Conservatives, with their DC rising by 41%, from 0.22 to 0.31. There is no convergence between Liberal and NDP partisans on this dimension. More broadly, there is generally weaker evidence of increasing similarity between Liberal and NDP partisans, but this, in large part, is because they started off similar to begin with – the only exception being in their ideological self-placement. It is also worth noting that the correlation between the social and economic dimensions has almost doubled since 1993, rising from 0.19 to 0.35. Left-leaning and right-leaning partisans have become ideologically distinct *within* ideological dimensions and *across* them as well.

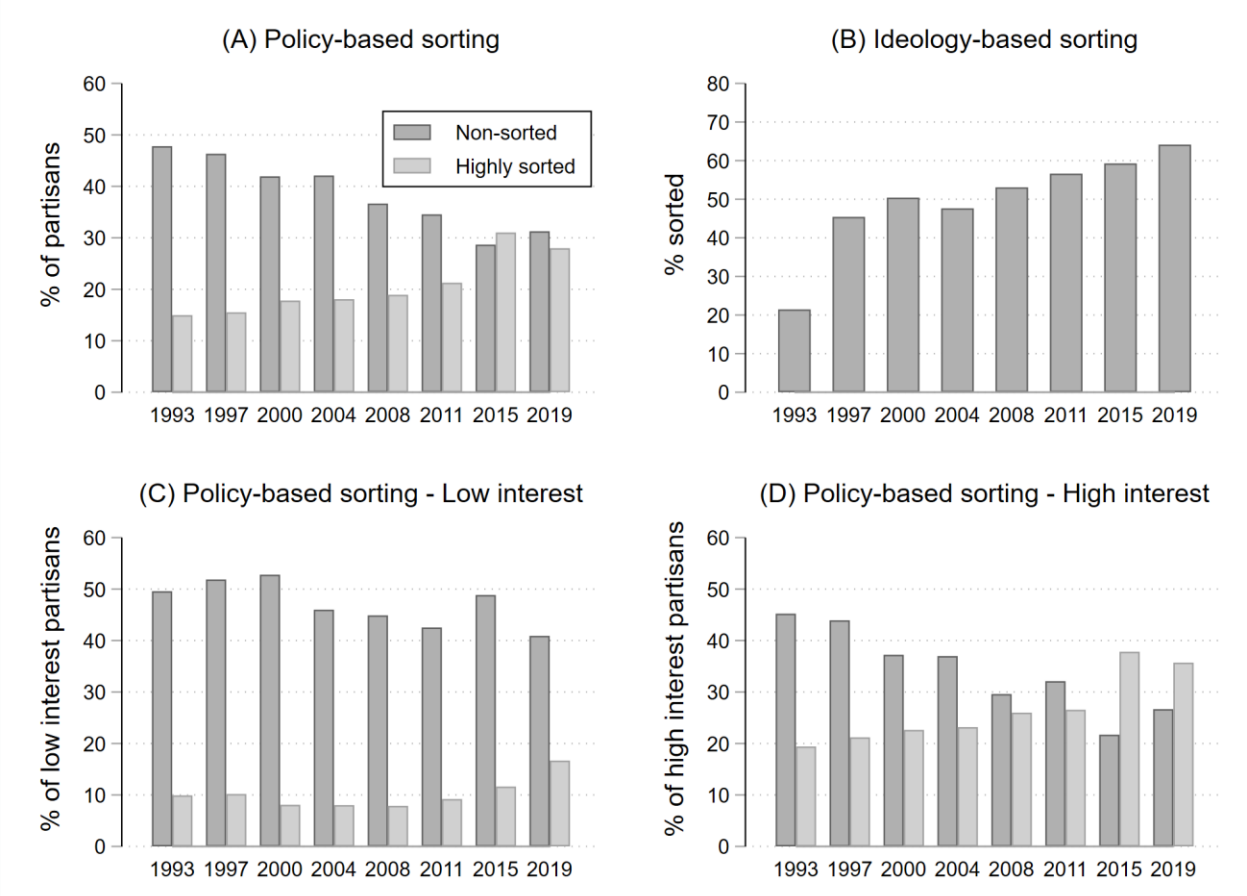

Figure 4. Partisan sorting in the Canadian Election Study using policy (A) and ideological identity-based measures (B); policy-based measure by respondents with low levels of political interest (C); and high levels of political interest (D)

The story of an increasingly sorted Canadian public is also strikingly supported by the individual-level measure of partisan sorting. Panel A of Figure 4 shows that the number of non-sorted partisans has decreased over time (i.e. score of 0) from 48% in 1993 to 31% in 2019. In contrast, the number of highly sorted partisans has gone up considerably (score between 5 and 8), from 15% in 1993 to 28% in 2019. Sorting appears to be *much* stronger among those with high levels of political interest. Among these respondents, the share those that are highly sorted increased from 19% in 1993 to 36% in 2019, while the number non-sorted dropped from 45% to 27%. In sharp contrast, there was only a small change in sorting among those with low levels of political interest, as shown in panels C and D of Figure 4. This is consistent with a story of elite-driven partisan sorting (Levendusky, 2009b).

It is also possible to construct a measure of sorting based on whether a respondent's partisanship matches their self-professed ideology. Respondents scored 1 on this measure if they indicated either partisanship in the NDP or Liberal Party and a self-placed ideology score below 5 on 0-10 self-placement scales, or, if they were a partisan of the Conservative Party or its legacies, a self-placed ideology score above 5. They scored zero if the placed themselves at the scale's mid-point, or on the wrong side of the scale. Unfortunately there were question wording differences in 1993 and 2000 asking respondents whether they were left, right, or centre, rather than to place themselves on the 0-10 scale. So these results from analyses using this measure should be treated with caution. Panel B of Figure 4 shows that the share of sorted partisans by this measure has also gone up over time, from 21% in 1993 to 64% in 2019.

How do voters sort?

Canadians are becoming more sorted. Their partisanship, ideological identification, and policy beliefs are all coming into much closer alignment. But what exactly is going on under the hood? We can imagine two scenarios in which citizens respond to signals from party elites. In one, a voter has policy beliefs are broadly left-leaning, but she identifies as a Conservative partisan. She observes signals from the parties indicating that they are increasingly staking out ideological positions. This makes her cross-pressured positon untenable, but her Conservative partisanship carries the day and she changes her policy beliefs to come into closer accord with her partisan identity. In another, a cross-pressured voter makes the opposite choice. Her beliefs come first. She changes her partisanship to come into closer alignment with her ideology.

These vignettes are an illustration of much larger debate in political science: what matters more, ideology or partisanship? A growing chorus of scholars in the United States see partisanship as foundational. They view partisanship as a social identity that is intertwined with other deeply held identities in American society and thus very unlikely to change (Lelkes, 2018; Mason, 2016, 2018). Meanwhile, most Americans do not harbour consistent or constrained ideological beliefs. As a result, they argue, partisanship is likely to do much more of the heavy lifting in explaining sorting and many other phenomena. In line with this research, Levendusky (2009b) found that Americans switched their ideology and beliefs to match their partisanship rather than the reverse with the ANES 1992-1996-2000 panel. Among voters who became more sorted on a number of different issues, people were much more likely to have changed their issue position than their partisanship.

It is not at all obvious whether partisanship has such primacy over ideology in Canada, notwithstanding work showing the importance of partisanship (Anderson & Stephenson, 2010; Medeiros & Noël, 2014; Nevitte et al., 2000). Canada has a multi-party system at the federal level, and different party systems at the provincial level, that prevent the reinforcement of partisan identity throughout the entire democratic system. There are also important limitations of Levendusky's analysis that need to be addressed. He confined his analysis to voters that became *more* sorted between the two waves, however, some voters surely became *less* sorted as well. In essence, he selected on the dependent variable. We cannot infer from his results whether opinion change or partisan change is more likely to be associated with sorting.

I use the 2004-2008 CES panel to shed light on this question in Canada. The primary dependent variables indicate whether a respondent became more sorted between 2004 and 2008, with their partisanship coming into closer alignment with ideological self-placement or policy beliefs (=1), weaker alignment (=-1), or neither (=0). I create a variable for whether or not the respondent switched their affiliation from parties of the left to the right or vice versa (=1). I also create a series of variables for whether or not the respondent changed their policy position from the right to the left or vice versa (=1). I am not counting those who switched into or out of the neutral position, nor do I count those who switched from partisanship to non-partisanship or vice versa.

Opinion change is modestly more common than partisan change, which is as expected and in line with Levendusky's findings. This is true on 5 of 9 measures below, shown in Table 1. A median of 58% of respondents changed only their issue position among those who changed either their opinion or partisanship. In contrast, only 36% of these same respondents changed only their partisanship. There is some heterogeneity across issues. Opinion change was less prevalent than partisan change on ideological self-placement, immigration, same-sex marriage, and income inequality.

Table 1. Partisan and opinion change and issue-specific sorting

	% of respondents who changed a position		**Change in sorting**	
	Opinion Only	PID Only	Opinion Only	PID Only
Ideological self-placement	35	57	0.22	0.28
Immigration levels	9	89	0.25	0.12
Same-sex marriage	20	72	0.24	0.14
Environment-jobs trade-off	67	27	-0.04	0.41
Standard of living	58	36	-0.02	0.06
Equal rights	59	32	-0.16	0.41
Assimilation	58	28	0.08	0.50
Income gap	19	75	0.10	-0.38
Get ahead	61	26	0.25	0.38
Median	58	36	0.10	0.28

Note: left panel displays the percentage of respondents who changed their opinion only or partisanship only out of those who changed either or both. Right panel displays the average change in sorting for those who changed their opinion only or their partisanship only.

Even though issue positions are generally less stable than partisanship among these respondents, it is those who changed their partisanship who became more sorted on average. Opinion change was linked to notably higher levels of sorting on ideological self-placement, and three of the eight issue positions used here, while partisan change was linked to more sorting on all but two issues. The median increase in sorting was 0.28 for partisan changers, compared to 0.10 for opinion changers. Why is this the case? People who change their partisanship are simply much more likely to do so in ways that align with their other beliefs, while people who change their issue preferences are just as likely to "de-sort."

Table 2. Opinion and partisan change and overall levels of sorting

Number of opinion changes		**Change in sorting**
	None (N=177)	0.22
	1 (N=197)	0.12
	2+ (N=173)	0.04
Change in PID		
	No (N=281)	-0.04
	Yes (N=34)	1.49

Ideology has perhaps been undersold as an explanation for sorting. Issue beliefs may be more changeable than partisanship, but they may be *too* changeable. They might not contribute to having more sorted respondents in the aggregate. This point is made even clearer when looking at the overall implications of opinion and partisan change for sorting among CES panel respondents. The change in overall sorting was higher for respondents who did not change any issue positions (0.22), compared to those who changed one opinion (0.12), and those who changed two or more (0.04). Respondents who readily change their policy positions are not becoming more sorted. In sharp contrast, respondents who change their partisanship became much more sorted (1.5), while those who did not change their partisanship did not become more sorted, on average. Partisan sorting in Canada appears to be driven by a small number of people switching their partisanship into closer alignment with their beliefs.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was two-fold: 1) provide a big picture overview of the state of polarization in Canada; and 2) illustrate the mechanism behind partisan sorting. Canada is polarizing, but the nature of this polarization is nuanced. There is virtually no evidence that Canadians are becoming more extreme in their ideological or policy beliefs – known as their ideological divergence. Moreover, Canadians harbour broadly centrist orientations. That is, Canadians are neither ideologically polarized, nor are they polarizing.

However, policy beliefs among Canadians are becoming increasingly correlated with one another *and* with partisanship. That is, Canadians are becoming more ideologically consistent and much more sorted. Ideology is now an important characteristic of partisan conflict – perhaps more so than at any point in Canadian history. Further, this sorting appears to be a result of people switching their partisanship to align with their beliefs and ideological identity.

There are of course important limitations to the above analyses that need to be acknowledged. First, the CES has a limited variety of policy questions asked continuously over time, while ideological identification is not asked as far back or as consistently as we might like. The CES is, however, is the only option for evaluating Canadian public opinion over time. Second, the placement of the policy questions in the mail back survey seriously compromises the sample size of the panel analyses. More work is needed using panel data to identify the mechanism undergirding the partisan sorting we have observed in Canada.

Notwithstanding these caveats, the implications of these findings are substantial. They should provide a starting point for future research. For one, what caused partisan sorting in Canada? Research in the United States has hinted at a link between elite polarization and partisan sorting – the clearly cues sent by political elites allow people to sort accordingly (Levendusky, 2009b). As Canadian political elites have also polarized (Cochrane, 2010, 2015), this seems like a promising starting point. For another, how does Canada (and the U.S.) compare cross-nationally in levels of partisan sorting? Is elite polarization linked to sorting in other contexts, as suggested by some prior work (Adams et al. 2012a, 2012b)?

And perhaps most importantly, what are the implications of these findings for Canadian politics? Partisan sorting is a potential driver of affective polarization in Canada. The dance of ideology, partisanship, and affect could lead to detrimental outcomes, liked biased information processing, heightened demand for partisan news, more social distance or alienation between partisan groups, and perhaps more contentious political discourse. Much more research is needed on all of these topics moving forward.

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