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A House Divided against Itself?

> *We need some people who are active in a certain respect, others in the middle, and still others passive . . .. How could a mass democracy work if all the people were deeply involved in politics?*
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> Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954)

Much of the modern study of mass political behavior in the United States often returns to three books released during the Eisenhower administration. *Voting* by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) approached its subject from a sociological perspective. Anthony Downs' (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is the foundational study of political decision-making from the rational-choice perspective. *The American Voter* by Campbell et al. (1960) pioneered the use of the mass survey for political research. These approaches to studying politics are ubiquitous now, but, at the time, these were pathbreaking methodological advances. The authors of these books were to the study of politics what Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Elvis Presley were to popular music.

While these books are rightly praised for their insights, we want to briefly highlight their titles. The titles clearly state what the books are about and make it clear that these books are not shy in their ambitions. These books are about voting and democracy, and this is obvious to someone who can only see the spines of the books.

The title of this book is more of a mystery. What is the other divide? And if this book is about the *other* divide, this implies that another book could have been written about a different divide that is unstated but clearly important – after all, the divide at the center of this book is the *other* one and not the one that everybody is thinking about.

Since this is not a detective story, let us solve both of these mysteries at the start of the book. The *other* divide is the divide between those people who make

politics a central part of their lives and those who do not. The unstated, more familiar divide is the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans.

The partisan divide should be more familiar because there is no shortage of research articles offering evidence of its presence, most recently through the lens of affective polarization. Democrats and Republicans do not want to have dinner together (Chen and Rohla 2018); they appear to see the other party as less than human (Martherus et al. 2021); they would be upset if their child married someone of the opposing party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012); and they may even be happy if someone of the other party contracted a debilitating illness (Kalmoe and Mason 2019). Coverage of this partisan animosity has also become something of a news beat. Between the summer of 2018 and the summer of 2019, for example, *The Washington Post* published more than fifty articles invoking partisan polarization; *The New York Times* published nearly twice as many.

The other divide – the divide in people's focus on politics that is at the center of this book – is actually not less documented. In fact, the books we mentioned at the start of this chapter all allude to this divide through studies on political attention. Both *Voting* and *An Economic Theory of Democracy* suggest that differences in levels of political attention are important to democracy. In a section titled "Involvement and Indifference," Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) write that democracy functions better with "a distribution of voters than by a homogeneous collection of 'ideal' citizens" (315). Downs (1957) describes a division of labor in which masses of inattentive members of the public can free ride off the efforts of the smaller number of politically attentive citizens. On the other hand, the authors of *The American Voter* were less sanguine about the large proportion of the public who "pay much less attention to political events than is commonly realized" (Campbell et al. 1960, 182). They document the failures of the inattentive public, writing, "many people fail to appreciate an issue exists, others are insufficiently involved to pay attention to recognized issues, and still others fail to make connections between issue positions and party policy" (Campbell et al. 1960, 183).

Individually, some of the authors of *The American Voter* had still bigger concerns. Converse (1962), for example, worried that there were some people who were so "uninvolved" in politics that, even during elections, they received "no new relevant information" (587). He did not entirely blame the uninvolved for this outcome; media coverage of congressional candidates, he wrote, is "buried in such a remote section of the paper" that "it is no wonder that data that we have collected over the years show a large portion of citizens who fail to be aware of their congressional candidates as individuals at all" (Converse 1962, 586). He also wondered whether people who are so uninvolved in politics can engage in the type of self-governance that is required for the maintenance of American democracy (Converse 1964). For Converse, then, this divide in people's attention to politics was not the "other" divide – it was *the* focal divide.

Six decades later, times have changed for both divides. The American Political Science Association (APSA) of the 1950s was concerned that the parties were not divided enough (APSA Report 1950). In 2020, the presidents of APSA wrote an op-ed noting that "doubts about whether the election will be fair are being raised from all directions" – an outcome, they suggested, fueled at least in part by deep-seated partisan divisions in America (Aldrich et al. 2020). The emergence of new media technologies means that people no longer have to seek out what Converse (1962) had termed the "remote section" of their local newspaper to learn about their congressional candidates. It is now easier for even the most casual, most "uninvolved" news consumer to come across "relevant" political information. Yet, although increased media options give people many more ways to learn about politics, the diversification of media also makes it easier to avoid politics altogether (Prior 2007) – potentially exacerbating the divides in political attention. These differences between our modern era and the post-World War II time period set the stage for the thesis of this book: The growing partisan divide in America can only be understood in the context of the growing gulf between people who spend their day following politics and those who do not (i.e., the *other* divide).

As we will suggest in this book, people's focus on politics – which we will refer to as "involvement" – is best considered as a continuum. For the time being, however, it is easier to understand our argument if we can divide citizens into three groups. Some people are, to use Converse's (1962) term, "uninvolved"; they are like the Nebraska respondent in his study, who explained that they "don't just know what the parties have been up to lately" (587). Some people, a much larger group, are more likely to behave in the ways Hutchings (2005) suggests: They focus on politics when something happens that is important to them. Finally, there is a third group of people, a group whose focus on and attention to politics is outsized; they are, to foreshadow our core argument, *deeply involved* in politics (a term taken from Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee [1954]).

The divide between this third group, the deeply involved, and everyone else is key to understanding modern American politics. It would seem natural to think this third group has a lot in common with the second group – those who are sometimes involved in politics. Both of these groups know the basics, they likely know what is going on in the news, and they typically vote. But in this book, we will argue and show that the deeply involved group is unique in a variety of ways that are consequential to American politics.

It is this deeply involved group, we will argue, that has affected how many political observers evaluate the state of American politics. Many assume that the polarization that exists in modern America is experienced similarly by the vast majority of Americans. But this is not the case. Many Americans *do* dislike the political elites of both parties, but they do not necessarily direct this anger at ordinary voters. At times, these people may even perceive partisanship as unimportant and politics to be increasingly counterproductive. The loud,

angry partisans who have come to define this modern political era of hyper-partisanship for so many, we show in this book, are largely concentrated in the group of the deeply involved.

In this way, the "other" divide is fundamental. On one side is a minority of Americans who are deeply involved in politics. On the other side is the majority of Americans who have much less investment in day-to-day political outcomes. These two groups have different social networks, different policy preferences, different ideas about family life and child-rearing, and, of course, different beliefs about political parties. The deeply involved minority does *genuinely* dislike rank-and-file members of the other party; this group may even wish ill on out-partisans. For many less involved Americans, political divisions are more complicated: They do not love the opposing party but are more likely to direct the bulk of this animosity at elites and party activists.

People who are deeply involved in politics are also more likely to express their opinions: They discuss politics with others, and they are more likely to raise their voices via social media. In turn, journalists have become drawn to exemplars of angry partisans, which means the information people get about American politics has become flooded with news about political hatred and partisan contempt. Though they form a minority, the amplified voices of the deeply involved are perceived as the voices of most – if not all – Americans. America appears profoundly divided by politics because when people visualize politics, the "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann 1922, 1) are of the deeply involved – and the deeply involved *are*, in fact, profoundly divided by politics.

1.1 AMERICA, DIVIDED BY POLITICS

In 2018, *The New York Times* ran a survey of 2,204 Americans. The main question in the survey – borrowed from the long-running General Social Survey (GSS) – began as follows:

> We are all part of different groups. Some are more important than others when we think of ourselves.
>
> In general, which in the following list are **first, second and third most important to you in describing who you are?** (Badger and Bui 2018)

What followed was a list of possible identities that included such things as "my occupation," "my race or ethnic background," "my religion," "my role in the family," and "my political party or movement." The *Times* was especially interested in that last category – politics. They were conducting this survey in what they described as an "era of acrid partisanship" and wanted to compare the results of their survey to the 2004 GSS result. In 2004, only 4 percent selected "my political party or movement" as one of their top three most important descriptors. "We suspected those numbers might be higher today," wrote *New York Times* reporters, Emily Badger and Quoctrung Bui (2018).

The results seemed to surprise the reporters. In 2018, in the heat of a midterm election, 16 percent of survey respondents ranked politics in their top three most important identities. Of the ten possible identities given to people, politics came in second to last, followed only by social class. Only 3% of people ranked politics as their most important identity, compared to 39% who ranked family status first and 16% who placed religion first. Certainly, these patterns showed a considerable increase from 2004, but the importance of politics did not seem to increase "to a huge degree," Badger and Bui (2018) wrote.

Using a slightly different question, the *New York Times* survey also asked respondents to rate the importance of these different identities. Now, the respondents did not have to select just three identities from the set; they could, in theory, report that *all* ten identities were equally very important to them. Again, however, politics came in next to last: Just over 20 percent of the respondents reported that their political and partisan identities were very important to them, compared to more than 50 percent who reported that their family identities were very important.

The *New York Times* survey is not an anomalous result. In a different survey, Druckman and Levendusky (2019) asked a different sample of Americans to engage in a similar task: rating the importance of six different identities on a scale of 1 to 5. Looking at the average ratings, Druckman and Levendusky (2019) found that partisanship tied for last. Political identities, they wrote, were rated as "significantly less important than all other identities apart from [social] class" (Druckman and Levendusky 2019, SI10).

Elsewhere, Karpowitz and Pope (2020) posed a similar question as part of the American Family Survey (AFS). Fielding their survey during a highly contentious presidential election, Karpowitz and Pope also asked respondents to rate the importance of a set of identities. Again, politics came in last – though 34 percent of people did report that their political party was either very or extremely important to them (Karpowitz and Pope 2020, 14). This is, notably, higher than the percentage who viewed politics and partisanship as very important in the *New York Times* survey. That being said, other comparable identities are also rated as more important in the AFS than the *New York Times* survey. In the AFS, 44 percent of respondents said that their religious identities were important, for example, relative to only about 35 percent in the *Times*. Still, while the actual percentage of Americans for whom political identities are important is an open question (likely, one highly dependent on measurement), a unifying pattern in these results is that political identities seem much less important to people than their other characteristics.

That politics seemed so much less important to people relative to their other identities surprised the *New York Times* reporters (the political scientists who found similar patterns seem less surprised). Indeed, much of the article about these results – "Americans Say Their Politics Don't Define Them. But It's Complicated" – offers possible explanations about why the data patterns are actually hiding just how important politics is to the American public. Identities

are inherently contextual, and perhaps, the article posits, more people would have reported that their political identities were important to them had the survey begun with a political prime. Or perhaps, "other identities on this list – religion, race, gender, even occupation – have increasingly become intertwined with politics." People do not need to "explicitly prioritize their politics," Badger and Bui (2018) wrote, because "these other identities now offer a clearer window into their politics."

Badger and Bui (2018) are, without a doubt, correct. Indeed, they should be – their reporting on this topic relies not only on the survey but also on interviews with five different political scientists studying American political partisanship. Political parties have become better sorted (Levendusky 2009), and the result is a clearer division of the American public (Fiorina 2016). People are increasingly receiving social and political cues about the way others who are like them are supposed to behave in various political contexts (Barber and Pope 2019; Connors 2020; Druckman et al. 2021b). People are bringing politics to, ostensibly, nonpolitical contexts more than they have in the past (Iyengar et al. 2019). Politics is obviously *divisive*.

But there are two ways to consider the divisions that politics creates, and both are present in the *New York Times* article. Badger and Bui choose to focus on the one that they believe lurks beneath the surface of their survey: America is so divided that partisan divisions are inherent even in people's nonpartisan characteristics. Yet, the data also suggest the possibility of another political divide: There is a minority of people for whom politics is of clear, explicit importance.

Even if politics is inextricably linked to our other identities, there is likely a difference between people who select politics and partisanship when asked to pick just three most important identities and those who do not.

Spry's (2018) multidimensional approach to identities offers a useful way to think through this distinction. There is a difference, Spry argues, between belonging to a group (what she terms "membership"), identifying with a group ("identity"), and believing that what happens to other members of the group also affects you ("consciousness"). In Spry's framework, many people are group members, but only some people are what she calls "strong identifiers" – people for whom a personal identity is heavily connected with a particular group membership. What makes someone a strong identifier, Spry argues, is that "the self and the group are inextricably tied" (Spry 2018, 60). Extrapolating this idea to the *New York Times* survey, what Spry's theory first suggests is that we cannot conflate the idea of having a partisan team with the importance of that team for one's sense of self. Second, however, Spry's argument underscores the importance of self-categorization: There is something unique about a group of people who, when given a set of other identities, chose politics.

The New York Times acknowledges that the data suggest that "most Americans don't live and breathe politics the way Washington news fiends do

(or, to be honest, the way we do)." Yet, *The New York Times* misses an important nuance. When asked to describe themselves, there are relatively few people for whom politics is primary. The authors of the article assume that this outcome is somehow a function of their measure being imprecise and failing to capture the fundamental place political and partisan divides hold for many Americans. But, to be a cliché of the terrible anonymous reviewer every academic has encountered, we suggest the data point to a different question: If so few people believe that politics is important to them, why does America seem so divided? The answer, as we will suggest throughout this book, is that there is a critical divide between those who believe politics holds a primary place in their lives and those who do not.

1.2 CAPTURING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH POLITICS

Imagine that there are two people, whom, for the sake of this example, we will call Chip and Dale. Imagine that Chip does not want to read any news about politics, nor does he want to hear his friends discuss political campaigns. Chip may know that an election is coming but has little interest in stories about the candidates; he knows next to nothing about politics. Dale, on the other hand, checks political news on an hourly basis, and he will specifically search out information about an ongoing campaign; he feels an odd sense of anxiety when he cannot follow political news. Dale is knowledgeable about politics, but, more than that, he seeks out social interactions that focus on politics and these social interactions often take the form of being vocal – he regularly posts news stories and shares his political opinions via social media. It makes Dale frustrated and angry when he sees people posting things about politics that he finds incorrect or contrary to his own position. It also makes him frustrated and angry to know how little attention Chip pays to politics. Were Chip and Dale to be asked about interest in and attention to politics in a survey, Chip would likely select the category that reflects the least interest and attention, while Dale would likely place himself in the top category of both measures. The survey measure, then, reflects the very clear distinction in how Chip and Dale relate to politics.

Now let's say we have a third person: Pete. Pete checks in with political news every day – though he never feels as anxious about it as Dale. Pete will discuss politics with some coworkers or friends and may even post "I voted!" via social media on Election Day. Pete feels some frustration when he sees others share opinions that he does not agree with, but he usually ignores those types of posts on social media and has never shared a post with his own political opinion. Pete believes he has enough political knowledge to feel comfortable with politics. In a survey, Pete would likely select response options that reflect that he is very interested in and pays a good deal of attention to politics – the same response options as Dale.

Pete and Dale end up in the same interest and attention categories, though their relationships with politics are markedly different. Politics is more

important to Dale; he is much more *involved* in politics. Dale is more likely to be politically vocal. If one of these two people is going to end up in a protracted political argument, it is more likely to be Dale. When journalists turn to social media to consider the shape of political opinions on a topic (McGregor 2019), they are going to be much more likely to encounter Dale's opinion than Pete's. Just as Dale and Chip have different relationships with politics, so too do Dale and Pete. The difference between Chip and Dale is reflected in how they respond to survey questions about interest and attention; the difference between Pete and Dale, however, is less clear-cut.[1]

Chip, Dale, and Pete reflect two types of variation in measures that categorize people's levels of interest in and attention to politics. The first is the expected variation *across* the categories – for example, between Chip and Dale/Pete; the second, however, is the variation *within* categories – for example, between Dale and Pete. This second form of variation is certainly to be expected; there is no ordinal survey measure that can avoid within-category variation. Indeed, measures of attention and interest are likely better than many other ordinal measures in capturing relevant individual distinctions (see Prior 2019 for a discussion). Our argument is not a critique of these measures (in fact, we use these measures at various points in the book). Rather, our argument is that variation within the top categories of interest and attention hints at a meaningful but heretofore unexplored political divide between people like Pete and people like Dale.

Of course, our example is just hypothetical. As a next step, then, we turn to data from two national surveys. Our goal in the next sections is very simple: Given that there are different ways in which someone may engage with politics, can we observe variation *within* the response categories of interest and attention measures? In other words, do surveys offer any patterns that suggest that Petes and Dales end up in the same attention and interest categories?

1.2.1 Over-Time Patterns

If, as we suggested previously in this chapter, people are imagining an America where people are extraordinarily politically vocal, the implication is that people are also imagining an America where people are highly interested in and attentive to politics. There are glimmers of this possibility in some survey data. In a 2017 Pew survey, for example, 52 percent of Americans reported that they started paying more attention to politics after the 2016 election. Of course, paying more attention does not necessarily mean paying a *high* level of attention – after all, if one begins at no attention, even a slight shift is an increase. Also, an increase in attention may not necessarily reflect patterns in political interest.

[1] We note, however, that the actual Chip, Dale, and Pete are cartoon characters who pay no attention to American politics given that their primary residence is a magic kingdom.

When we track over-time patterns in interest using the American National Election Study (ANES) from 1956 to 2016, we do see some evidence of an increase in interest (Figure 1.1a). It is not an entirely clear increasing pattern – there is a dip in interest during the 1996 election and then an increase again in 2004 – but it is a line that generally trends upward. In 2016, about 50 percent of ANES respondents categorized themselves as "very much interested," compared to 29.6 percent in 1956.

To put this increase into a broader context, we also plot other variables that may reflect greater over-time engagement in politics. In Figure 1.1b, alongside the interest measure, we also plot the percentage of ANES respondents who engaged in any campaign activities over the course of the campaign. In 1952, 23.9 percent of ANES respondents reported undertaking some campaign activity, and in 2016, 23.4 percent reported doing so. Across the entire time period, campaign activities have always lagged behind levels of interest. What is more, in the three most recent campaigns with the highest interest levels – 2008, 2012, and 2016 – campaign activity lagged about 20 percentage points behind interest.

In Figure 1.1b, then, we see that people's attempts at influencing others have increased considerably over the time period. In 1952, 28.1 percent of people reported trying to influence someone's vote, compared to 48.9 percent in 2016. On the other hand, the patterns in postelection conversation (a measure that is only included on the ANES starting in 1992) are less clear. Generally, few people discuss politics after an election ends, though more than 40 percent

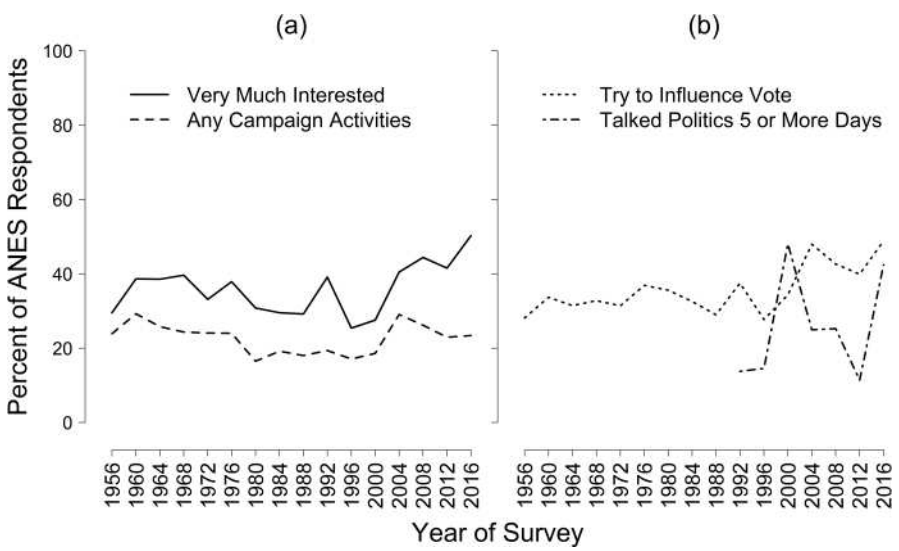

FIGURE 1.1 Changes in campaign interest and activity from 1952 to 2016
Source: Data from the American National Election Study cumulative file.

continued postelection political discussions in 2000 and 2016, likely reflecting the postelection challenges (in 2000) and a surprise outcome (in 2016).

The patterns in Figure 1.1, then, suggest that increases in interest do not always co-occur with increases in other forms of political engagement. We do not see similar shifts in campaign activities, for example, and shifts in postelection discussion behavior seem more reflective of the election context than of some intrinsic interests. In 2012, while 41.5 percent of ANES respondents reported being "very much interested," only 11.4 percent were still talking about politics after the campaign was over.

Our goal is not to explain these over-time patterns in levels of interest and other measures of engagement.[2] Rather, our goal is to suggest that the divergences in Figure 1.1 hint at the possibility that the "very much interested" category includes people who vary in their relationship with politics. In the next section, we examine the possibility of variation within this top category of interest more directly.

1.2.2 Variation in Top Categories

Focusing on over-time patterns, as we did in the previous sections, limits the measures that we can track. Therefore, in this section we rely on more recent data and look more directly at variation within interest and attention categories. Our goal, again, is not to critique these measures but merely to explore the possibility that the highest interest and attention categories include different types of people. We again rely on the ANES but, in this section, also include data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Before we turn to the variation, we present the distributions of the different interest and attention measures we are using (Figure 1.2 a-c). As Prior (2019) demonstrates, interest is unidimensional, suggesting that the "Interest and Following Campaigns" measure (Figure 1.2a) and the "Interest in Public Affairs" measure (Figure 1.2c) are likely capturing similar ideas. In Figure 1.2b, however, it is possible that the attention measure is capturing a different aspect of people's approach to their political surroundings. The distributions in Figures 1.2 reflect the final data point in Figure 1.1: 50 percent of respondents, in both the ANES and the CCES, select the highest interest categories. The attention measure in Figure 1.2b looks somewhat different: Only 20.2 percent select the highest category, though 55.3 percent report that they pay attention either most of the time or all of the time.

Within these categories, however, we see considerable variation in other forms of engagement with politics (Figures 1.3–1.6). It is certainly clear that

[2] One question that may come up is whether people believe it is socially desirable to report that they are interested in politics. Prior (2019), however, demonstrates that this is unlikely to be the case; people, he concludes, do not seem to be "compelled to exaggerate their political interest" (42). People's self-categorization as "very much interested" seems genuine.