

Is Everything Falling Apart?

Left-Right Polarization in the OECD World after World War II

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According to the conventional wisdom, political polarization has been growing throughout the past few decades. Making use of some new measures and differentiating between party and voter polarization, this paper offers some evidence for this claim in a comparative assessment of the trends prevailing in the OECD countries. The results show that the ideological stances of government and opposition parties as measured on a left-right Manifesto scale have become more polarized in the OECD world. Yet, this development does not have its roots in a growing polarization of the electorates. The ideological polarization across countries has furthermore been uneven. This is also the case for the United States where polarization of party platforms was more pronounced in the early 1960s than in the 1990s or early 2000s. Cross-sectional regressions show that the number of parties competing within a system for electoral office is a predictor of polarization both at the elite and the party supporter level.

Keywords

Political polarization – Cleavage – Left-Right – Manifesto - Eurobarometer

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Introduction

Almost all media pundits and academics seem to agree on the one observation that the political landscape has become more polarized in the United States. The two last U.S. elections seem to offer ample illustration for this generalization. As a CBS News Poll suggested on July 4, 2004, “Voters from each party have drastically different views on a number of issues, from current economic conditions to the role of religion in a presidential campaign.” New York Times commentator Brooks (2004) used these trends to herald a new era of “political segregation” and wrote: “People lose touch with others in opposing, now distant, camps. And millions of kids are raised in what amount to political ghettos”.

Recent time series evidence assembled by Rosenthal (2004, see also Poole and Rosenthal 1984 and McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2004) support this claim. His analysis identifies the year 1975 as a turning point when both Democrats and Republicans moved to more extreme positions on the left-right or, in his parlance, the liberal-conservative dimension of conflict. Layman and McCarsey (2002) support this view, but caution that constituencies might not be as polarized as the political elites: Their ‘conflict extension model’ argues that the sharp ideological division is limited to party activists.

This article tests whether these U.S. trends reflect a general pattern in the industrialized world. My empirical analysis traces the party-level polarization between government and opposition parties in the OECD world in the post World War II-era. I can identify in line with Rosenthal and Poole increasing elite-level polarization at the aggregate level. This development is, however, not matched by a similar trend among the electorates where the left-right division has followed a much more erratic pattern. While the level of polarization decreased among party supporters from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, it became more polarized again in the beginning of the 1990s. Voters are, at the average, also more moderate than the parties they support. Some tentative empirical tests show that political polarization can hardly be attributed to standard socio-economic determinants, but that institutionalist explanations such as the number of parties play a decisive role.

The empirical analysis makes usage of the polarization measures that Esteban and Ray (1994, see also Duclos, Esteban and Ray 2004) have introduced to the analysis of social conflict. The main idea of their axiomatic measure is that standard inequality measures do not adequately capture the divisions within a society. Their income polarization measure takes the wealth of competing groups, their cohesiveness, and the interrelationship between these two factors into account. The main difference to this socio-economic polarization index is, however, that I am relying on real preference data to estimate intra-group homogeneity. To

this end, I employ two of the most widely used databases, an updated version of the Manifesto data set (Budge et al. 2001) and the Eurobarometer trend file (Scholz and Schmitt 2001). While the former source is used to estimate government-opposition party polarization, the latter is intended to gauge corresponding values for mass electorate polarization.

The article is structured as follows: I will first introduce the concept of political polarization and discuss some of the studies that have referred to this concept in a systematic fashion. Next, I will introduce the data bases that I will use throughout the analysis and present the data on political polarization at the aggregate and the country level. I will offer some tentative tests of the explanations that attribute cross-national differences in polarization to socio-economic and institutional differences between countries. The article concludes with a brief summary and some suggestions for future research.

Contending Theories of Political polarization

The polarization between contending social forces is seen as a key cause of the end of the Weimar republic (Bracher 1955, Winkler 1994), the Russian revolution (Rosenberg and Koenker 1987), and many other decisive breakdowns of political order. The conjecture that political polarization is an intermediate step from social tensions towards civil unrest has a distinguished idea history. Marx (1931[1867]) and De Tocqueville (1857) contended that a revolution becomes more likely if the workers start to organize themselves politically if their economic situation does not improve in line with the welfare of capitalists.

In the 20th century, Linz (1978:44) described political polarization as a “strong centrifugal tendency on the part of all participants and the fragmentation of parties” and wrote: “The immediate result is deep personal antagonism between parties and the impossibility of forming a broad, shifting center coalition against extremists on both sides of the spectrum”. Huntington (1968:416-417) was less negative and saw two possible consequences of political polarization: an intensification of conflict and the creation of a broader based political system. While polarization is the “goal of the revolutionary”, it is also the “prerequisite for the shift from factional politics to party politics” in modernizing societies. Ideological polarization can, in other words, also be seen as a pre-requisite for increased political participation. Crepaz` (1990:200) study on polarization, which he measured through the ideological distance between the extremist parties, supports this view. In his view, “the bigger the degree of party polarization, the more people are exposed to political stimuli”.

More recent commentators largely focussed on negative impact of political polarization. Frye (2002) noticed devastating growth effects of the increasing ideological divergence between post-communists and reformers in some transition countries. Keefer and Knack (2002) report a similarly negative effect that various facets of social polarization such as inequality and ethnic fractionalization have on economic performance. Although most authors see thus political polarization as a vice rather than an accomplishment, they have hardly arrived at a unifying definition of the phenomenon. This article borrows from the literature on socio-economic polarization (Esteban and Ray 1994, Duclos, Esteban and Ray 2004) and defines political polarization as the extent to which political groups develop cohesive ideological positions, but use this identity to distance themselves from their competitors. Both ideological conflict and group cohesion are important topics in comparative politics. The cleavages that structure the political debates within a country have been systematically examined following Lipset and Rokkan's pathbreaking study on party systems. They famously stated that social "cleavages do not translate themselves into party oppositions as a matter of course" (Lipset and Rokkan 1967:112). They particularly advanced the "freezing" hypothesis according to which the party system of the 1960s reflects the social conflicts of the beginning of the 20th century.

As Sartori (1976), Zielinski (2002) and many others have remarked, the theory of social cleavages is rather unspecific about the conditions under which a cleavage is activated and political conflict grows and diminishes. Yet, the cleavage structure in Western democracies has remained remarkably stable. Mair and Bartolini (1990) have shown in their longitudinal study that party system and electoral preferences have stabilized over the years; electoral volatility was lower after World War II than in the inter-war years.

The most prominent dimension of conflict in the industrialized world is arguably still the division of parties and voters along the left-right continuum; this article will focus on political polarization along this cleavage. Nieuwbeerta and de Graaf (1999) show that the importance of class voting has only slightly diminished between 1980 and 1990 in twenty industrialized countries. Evans (1999:333) concludes that "Controlling for over-time changes in relevant characteristics ... does not alter class-vote patterns, or the centrality of class as a source of attitudes towards key issues such as inequality and redistribution". Goldthorpe (2002:19) similarly rejects claims that "other forms of social cleavage are superseding class as a basis of social identity." At the party level the left-right division has also remained the main cleavage (Budge et al. 2001).

Mainly socio-economic and institutionalist explanations have been advanced to account for the variations on this dimension across time and space. This section summarizes these literatures and derives some hypotheses from them.

Socio-economic explanations: Political conflict along a left-right dimension has according to Lipset and Rokkan its main roots in the workers versus owners-cleavage that originated from the industrial revolution.¹ Many authors have explored whether increasing inequality between these contending classes translate into an increased risk of political violence. Yet, the evidence on this relationship is so diverse that Lichbach's (1989:469) dictum still seems correct: "...not a single puzzle has been solved, nor do any puzzles seem closer to solution".

The relationship between socio-economic and political polarization is also not straightforward. Interestingly, the United States for which Nieuwbeerta and de Graaf (1999) cannot exclude the possibility of increasing class-based voting, is the OECD member state in which the fear of increasing political polarization has been most vividly articulated.² McCarty, Rosenthal and Poole (2004:4) observe in a detailed empirical study an increasing party-income divide in the U.S. electoral landscape: "...we can see that the stratification of partisanship by income has steadily increased over the past 40 years, leading to an increasing cleavage between the parties". This trend is, however, not directly driven by increased inequality but rather by increasing political polarization. Rosenthal (2004:37) expects that this divide strengthens rather than weakens the retrenchment efforts in social policy: "As long as prosperity continues for voters in the middle to upper segments of the income distribution, we are unlikely to see a major shift in favour of sharply redistributive policies."

Although it is not possible to generalize from this single-country experience, it seems to be clear that political institutions shape the way in which socio-economic tensions translate into political polarization and conflict. I will in the following outline some of the main implications that we can derive from the formal analysis of political institutions for the study of political polarization.

Political and institutional explanations: The canonical starting point for any inquiry into the interplay between parties, voters and electoral institutions is still Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. It is by now a well-established finding that party competition in a multidimensional issue space violates the Downsian prediction that parties will converge to the position of the median voter. Yet, parties converge to extreme positions in a multidimensional space. Merrill and Adams (2002:288, italics suppressed) expect in this vein

that “the more extreme the position of a candidate’s partisan, the more extreme the candidate’s optimal position”. Warwick (2004) observes that parties are often more extreme than their supporters. He demonstrates that neither the Downsian model nor the related directionality theory can account for these differences. Faulí-Oller, Ok and Ortuño (2003) show formally that the strategic nomination of candidates might be a reason for what they call the “polarization of platforms”. Polarization occurs especially in situations in which both parties chose radical candidates.

Political polarization differs also across political systems, as Cox (1990, 1997) work shows. Differentiating between systems with cumulative and non-cumulative voting, he identifies three “centrifugal” and “centripetal” incentives for candidates or parties that take an ideological positions in order to gain elections: “...ideological dispersion and minority representation can be promoted by (1) decreasing the number of votes per voter; (2) allowing partial abstention; and (3) increasing district magnitude” (Cox 1990:927). A case study by Adams (1996:141) confirms that parties are more ideologically dispersed in legislatures that are elected through a multi-member rather than a single-member district system: “...parties under multi-member districts will be ideologically diverse, which may undermine the ability of party leaders to build coalitions and enforce bargains.”

As Amorim Neto and Cox (1997) show in an evaluation of Duverger’s law, the institutionalist and the sociological interpretations are not mutually exclusive. The same is obviously the case for political polarization which can result from both socio-economic cleavages and electoral institutions. I will in the following test whether income inequality, changes in income inequality and the electoral characteristics of a state are in any meaningful way related to the amount of political polarization that we can observe. The next section will introduce this concept operationally.

Research Design

This analysis will rely to two data sets to measure different aspects of political polarization. An updated version of the Manifesto data set (Budge et al. 2001) is used to calculate the polarization between government and opposition-parties on left-right issues. The manifesto data set is based on the content analysis of party platforms in each election after World War II in a sample of countries that by and large corresponds to the OECD member states. The measures refer to the frequency with which the major political parties addressed and qualified specific policy areas and measures. The polarization scale employs the items that the Manifesto-project has qualified as left-right issues. The second data set is the Eurobarometer

trend file as it was assembled by Scholz and Schmitt (2001) at the University of Mannheim. Eurobarometers are regular surveys (usually twice a year) in the member states of the European Union. I use two variables – the identification of a respondent with a party and the ideological self-placement on a left-right – scale for the construction of the voter polarization measure.

One of the problems in the study of political polarization is the multitude of operational definitions of this concept. In some applications, it is simply used as a synonym for political conflict. Most studies that deal with political polarization in an active manner refer to range-based measures. Volkens (1996) uses for instance the range of the ideological positions of the competing parties as an indicator of what she refers to as polarization:

$$Pol - V = |x_l - x_r| \quad (1)$$

where x_l is the position of the most leftist and x_r the position of the most right-wing party.³

This study will use this variable as a control.

Sigelman and Yough (1978) weight the distance of the parties from the mean on a left-right scale with their electoral strength according to the following formula:

$$Pol - SY = \sum_{i=1}^N v_i (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \quad (2)$$

In equation (2), v_i is the percentage of votes won by each party in the last election, x_i its left-right score and \bar{x} the mean position on the left-right continuum. Layman and Carsey (2002a, b) introduce a similar measure to estimate party polarization in the United States. They compare the mean attitudes of National Election Studies respondents on some latent variables that they identified with the help of a confirmatory factor analysis.

McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (2004) combine census and survey data to construct a party-income stratification variable that is close to the spirit of the Esteban and Ray (1994, see also Duclos, Esteban and Ray 2004) measure of income polarization which is defined through two factors. The first one is the degree to which an individual identifies with her own group, while the second force is the alienation towards the other group. The degree of polarization depends in the view of Duclos, Esteban and Ray (2002) on “the separate contributions of alienation and identification and on their joint co-movement”. This leads to a measure that sums up all effective antagonisms within a society (Esteban and Ray 1994:831). The third polarization measure – P-ER- reflects these conditions:

$$P - ER = \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^n \pi_i^{\alpha+1} \pi_j |y_i - y_j| \quad (3)$$

where α^4 measures the intra-group homogeneity, y_i and y_i are the mean of the group positions and π the positions on the left right scale.

The construction of the P-ER variables started with the calculation of the absolute difference between the weighted means of the government and opposition party positions and party supporter positions on the left-right Manifesto and Eurobarometer scales; the weighting factor was the share of votes obtained in the last election.⁵ The α -parameter that is necessary to calculate the intra-group homogeneity refers to the standard deviation of all positions that have been taken on the left-right scales during the period under investigation. In accordance with Esteban and Ray (1994), the standard deviation was divided into 16 so that 16 different alpha measures were calculated. We used an alpha of 1.3 as a benchmark for intragroup homogeneity.

The three concepts measure all approximately the same. The Pearson correlation coefficients between POL-ER and POL-V on the one hand and POL-SY and POL-ER amount to 0.9 and 0.59 respectively. Because the Esteban-Ray measure has the soundest theoretical basis, the subsequent analysis will largely refer to this measure. Table 1 reports the data on the party and the voter polarization that we will use in the empirical analysis. We distinguish between the mean range and the mean of the polarization variables and indicate for which years data could be obtained.

[Table 1 about here]

Polarization in the OECD World: Trends and Influences

This section presents data on how polarization has evolved in the OECD world over the past decades. Figure 1 illustrates how government-opposition and voter polarization has evolved in the OECD world in the post World War II era. The results clearly indicate that party systems have become more polarized during this period. This confirms that the United States is not an isolated case in this respect. The analysis shows that polarization in the party platforms of government and opposition parties increased in the mid-1950s and remained relative stable for around twenty years. It started to increase again at the end of the Cold War and thus just at the very moment when Fukuyama (1992) heralded “the end of history” and thus the alleged obsolescence of ideological conflict. The development of political polarization among party supporters is more uneven. It also tends in line with Warwick (1994) to be lower than the division between parties. Yet, party supporters were more polarized in the second half of the 1970s than the parties they were voting for. The finding (e.g. Warwick 2004) that candidates

are often more radical than their voters is thus historically contingent, electorates were only considerably less polarized than the parties they were voting for during the 1980s and 1990s. Although the time series is rather short, the trend seems thus to have reversed and the electorates seem to have become less ideological.

[Figure 1 about here]

The development in the individual OECD countries is much more diverse, as Figure 2 shows. We also see that the increasing polarization between government and opposition parties in the aggregate is largely due to steady increases in polarization in New Zealand, Norway and Sweden. In the mid-1980s, the two Scandinavian countries still served as prime examples of states that exhibit elite moderation and solve conflicts through corporatist interest intermediation (Katzenstein 1985). Another group of states has experienced interludes in the ideological confrontation between government and opposition parties; the decreases in political conflict were, however, rather short lived. Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain and Ireland experienced the height of such spells of de-polarization in the 1970s; Canada, Greece, and the United States witnessed such changes in the 1980s.⁶ In a third group of countries, the level of party polarization has remained at more or less the same level throughout the entire period. This is especially the case for the southern European countries, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

The ideological division between party supporters has evolved in a much more volatile manner. This is obviously partly a consequence of the fact that we possess many more observations. Interestingly, some countries, which are highly polarized at the elite level, do not exhibit a similarly intense confrontation between voters of the competing ideological camps. We can for instance observe such discongruence for Spain in the second half of the 1990s. In Italy, parties seem almost always to be more divided than their voters. In Great Britain, the opposite was the case.

[Figure 2 about here]

The following analysis will test whether social or political factors explain the level of socio-economic polarization. To measure social tensions within a country, I will use the Deininger-Squire (1996) collection of Gini measures in the absence of data on income polarization for a large number of OECD countries. I will use the number of effective parties as the main characteristic of a political system. The data source is Cox (1997, see also Amorim Neto and Cox 1997). The number of effective parties has shown to reflect the number of cleavages in a political system and the permissiveness of the political system. Because the variables do not change much over time and because there are few inequality measurements obtainable, I

simply calculate a cross-sectional OLS regression covering the OECD countries (Manifesto data) and the EU member states (Eurobarometer data).

[Table 2 about here]

The preliminary analysis reported in Table 2 lends some support to the institutionalist conjecture that political polarization reflects electoral incentives. The more parties that are present in a political system, the sharper is the division between government and opposition. This relationship holds for the party platforms and the ideological self-evaluations of the voters. Neither the level of inequality nor the inequality change witnessed between 1980 and 1990 influences the polarization between the parties in a systematic fashion. Yet, in the EU member states, increasing inequality has led to higher polarization between government and opposition parties. It should be noted, however, that this examination is preliminary and that the subsequent analysis will be more in line with the stratification measure that McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal have introduced.

Conclusion

This paper makes several contributions to the dispute on whether or not political polarization is growing in the industrialized world. First, I have introduced some new indicators to measure how political polarization has evolved in the OECD world over the past few years. Second, I have shown that government-opposition polarization has at the aggregate level steadily grown throughout the OECD world. This trend is, however, mainly observable in the party manifestos and not so much within the electorates. Third, mainly institutional variables account for differences in the level of government-opposition party and supporter polarization. Subsequent extensions of this paper will offer some additional tests of the linkage between the institutional and socio-economic determinants of political polarization. I will also try to add some additional data sources to the analysis.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Political polarization in the OECD member states (Alpha = 1.3)

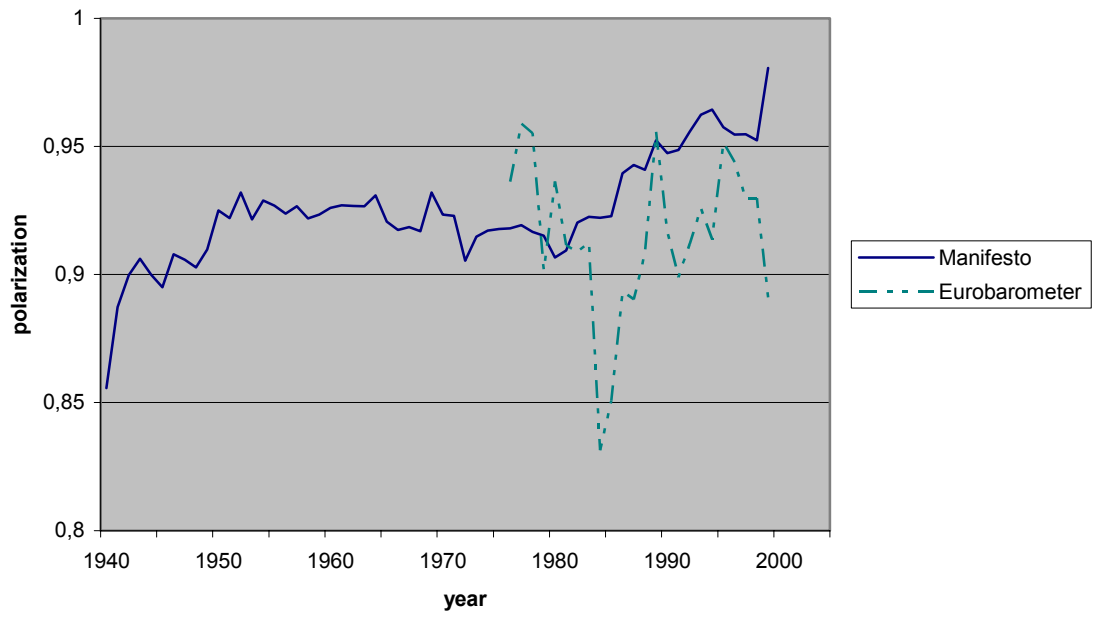


Figure 2: Political Polarization in Individual OECD Countries (Alpha=1.3)

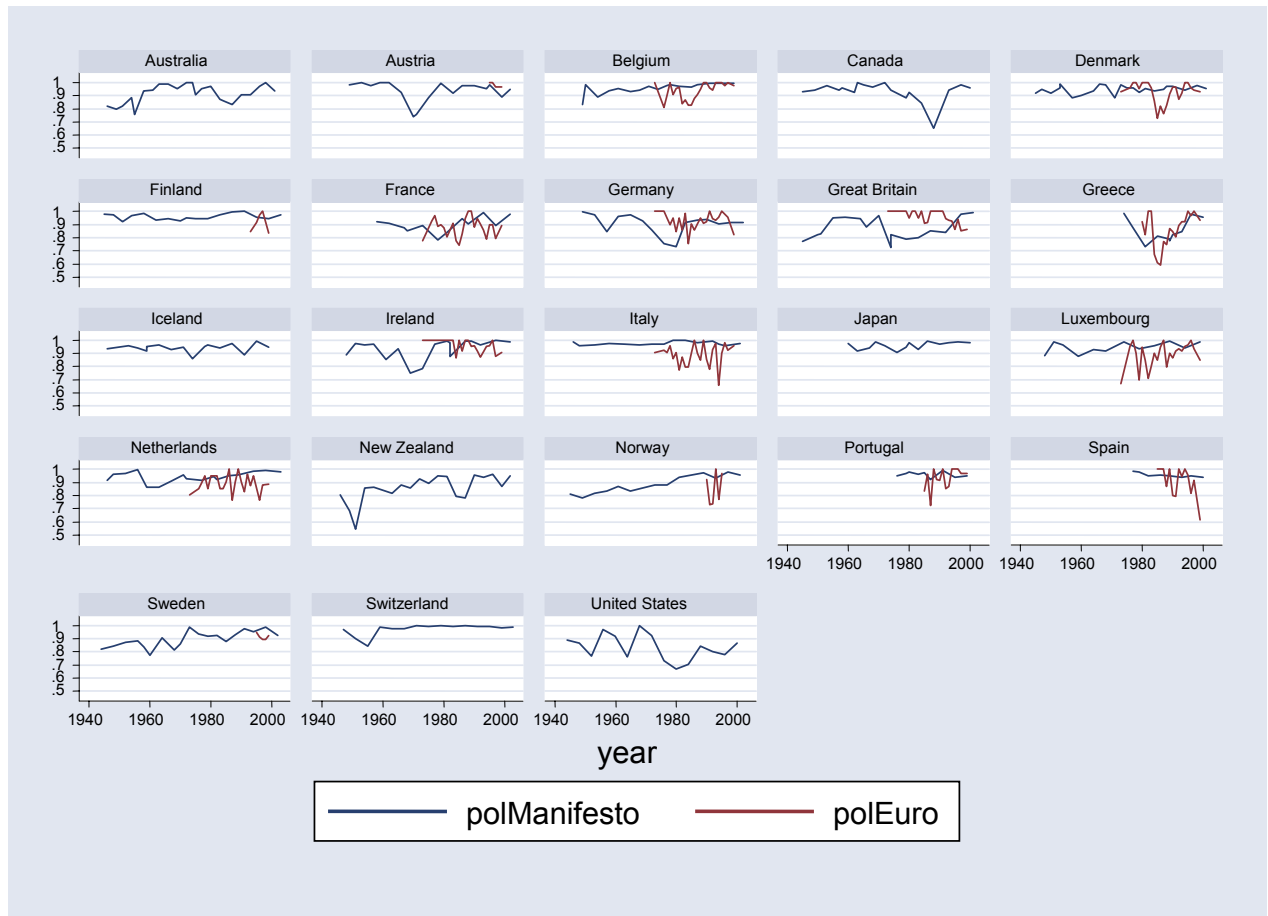


Table 1: Mean government-opposition polarization in the OECD

| Country | Manifesto | | Mean polarization | Eurobarometer | | |
|----------------|----------------|------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------|-------------------|
| | Years reported | Mean range | | Years reported | Mean range | Mean polarization |
| Australia | 1946-2001 | .4516 | .9131 | - | - | - |
| Austria | 1949-2002 | .3574 | .935 | 1995-1999 | .125 | 0.9824 |
| Belgium | 1946-1999 | .2412 | .9555 | 1977-1999 | .375 | 0.9369 |
| Canada | 1945-2000 | .3677 | .9301 | - | - | - |
| Denmark | 1945-2001 | .2877 | .9461 | 1973-1994 | .4792 | 0.9279 |
| Finland | 1945-2003 | .2258 | .9598 | 1993-1999 | .6000 | 0.914 |
| France | 1946-2002 | .5506 | .8989 | 1973-1997 | .9583 | 0.8773 |
| Germany | 1949-2002 | .4851 | .9025 | West: 1973-1999 | .4375 | 0.9268 |
| | | | | East: 1990-1999 | .4444 | 0.9549 |
| Great Britain | 1945-2001 | .6332 | .8798 | 1973-1999 | .3125 | 0.9604 |
| Greece | 1974-2000 | .675 | .8646 | 1980-1999 | .9211 | 0.8576 |
| Iceland | 1946-1999 | .2929 | .9437 | - | - | - |
| Ireland | 1948-2002 | .3079 | .9378 | 1973-1999 | .2292 | 0.9624 |
| Italy | 1946-2001 | .1267 | .9762 | 1973-1999 | .75 | 0.8885 |
| Japan | 1960-2000 | .2018 | .961 | - | - | - |
| Luxembourg | 1945-1999 | .2906 | .948 | 1973-1999 | .625 | 0.8859 |
| Netherlands | 1946-2003 | .3062 | .9417 | 1970-1999 | .6042 | 0.8921 |
| New Zealand | 1946-2002 | .7249 | .8564 | - | - | - |
| Norway | 1945-2001 | .5591 | .8877 | 1990-1996 | .8333 | 0.8529 |
| Portugal | 1975-1999 | .2129 | .959 | 1985-1999 | .5 | 0.9296 |
| Spain | 1977-2000 | .2225 | .9551 | 1985-1999 | .7857 | 0.9081 |
| Sweden | 1944-2002 | .5122 | .8965 | 1994-1999 | 1.0625 | 0.9201 |
| Switzerland | 1947-2003 | .1579 | .9722 | - | - | - |
| United States | 1944-2000 | .8492 | .8334 | - | - | - |
| Czech Republic | 1990-2002 | .2585 | .9503 | - | - | - |
| Hungary | 1990-2002 | .1300 | .9756 | - | - | - |
| Poland | 1991-2001 | .0451 | .9921 | - | - | - |
| Slovakia | 1992-2002 | .0558 | .9891 | - | - | - |

Table 2: The Determinants of Political Polarization in the OECD member states, 1990

| | Government-Opposition party platform polarization (<i>Manifesto</i>) | Government-Opposition party supporter polarization (<i>Eurobarometer</i>) |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Number of effective parties | 0.04 0.015 | 0.04 (0.01) |
| Gini coefficient | 0.004 (0.005) | 0.006 (0.004) |
| Difference in Gini, 1990- 1980 | 0.004 (0.007) | 0.02 0.005 |
| Constant | 0.65 (0.20) | 0.55 (0.18) |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.14 | 0.47 |
| Observations | 20 | 12 |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

Endnotes:

¹ Lipset and Rokkan (1967) identified four set of cleavages that became politicized in Western Europe: a centre-periphery, a state-church, a rural-urban industry cleavage and a workers-owner cleavage.

² The other country that could have moved in this period towards more class-based voting is Switzerland.

³ Poole and Rosenthal use similar measures to examine polarization in the U.S. Congress or among U.S. voters.

⁴ This polarization measure corresponds to the Gini index if $\alpha=0$.

⁵ The means have been z-standardized to make them comparable.

⁶ As indicated, Rosenthal (2004) identifies the mid-1970s as the turning point in the confrontation between Republicans and Democrats.