

Professional Development Grant Report  
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### Problem Researched & Research Process

This project aimed at developing and defining the concept of political polarization and thus contributing to our understanding of the "Culture Wars" thesis, which suggests that the American electorate has become more "polarized" and that American politics has become susceptible to the "extremes" of political ideology. This is an important & fundamental concept in American politics that is the subject of intense scholarly study. What is polarized politics and polarized over what? How responsive are politicians to the preferences and attitudes of the mass public? Is there a culture war and is American political culture polarized? While a substantial number of studies have been done on political polarization, these studies have been limited to pre-determined issues and a limited time horizon beginning in the 1970's. As such I developed a rigorous definition of the static and dynamic aspects of political polarization and provided a comprehensive examination of this phenomenon over a 50 year period. Using the software (STATA, STATTRANSFER, HARVARD GRAPHICS) I purchased with my professional development grant, I analyzed an extensive amount of data studying political polarization in American politics. I examined the open-ended responses from the NES studies from 1954-2006 to gain a broad perspective on political polarization unfettered by the imposition of researcher beliefs regarding relevant issues and issue dimensions. I used the Poole & Rosenthal D-W Nominat scores to directly assess the relationship between political polarization at the mass and elite levels. I further developed a time series data set of public opinion poll on gay rights that has an obvious relevance to the Culture Wars question. Analyzing the effects of polarization over time necessarily required the employment of large databases of survey respondents, voters, voting districts, and an assortment of demographic and related potential causes in order to adequately account for rival explanations and properly assess the research question. The analysis employed statistical estimates to assess marginal shifts in the relevant partisan and political variables to polarization, using the software I purchased with the PDG.

### Research Findings & Conclusions

This research was presented in the spring of 2009. I presented a paper entitled, "The Predicates of Mass-Elite Political Polarization in Perspective: Why Perturbations in Polarization are a Persistent Puzzle in Political Science" at the 67th national meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago, IL held from April 2nd to April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009. I found significant political polarization along social, economic, and foreign policy political dimensions. This analysis finds significant ideological polarization in the mass public, significant ideological polarization among party elites and party identifiers, a growing divide between party identifiers in the mass public, and a strong linear trend in partisan and ideological polarization over time. Furthermore, there is evidence that political elites are responsive to perturbations in mass ideological beliefs and there is strong evidence of a recursive relationship between the ideology of party identifiers and that of party elites. I find that partisan elite polarization is recursively related to partisan mass polarization. While it is certainly true that elites attempt to influence the mass public through the framing and emphasis of certain issues, it is just as true that elites strive to detect those issues which have become salient to their partisan constituents and shape their position-taking accordingly. Scholars examining the factors of polarization in American politics miss half of the story when ignoring the influence that shifts in the mass electorate have on elite behavior. Electorates change, they change in comprehensible ways, the issues and opinions of aggregate electorates shift sometimes independent of elite preferences, and these shifts produce shifts in electoral behavior. As a result, the optimum ideological disposition for a Republican or Democratic party elite has changed over time. And that shift has been decidedly towards the poles and not the center. It thus contributes to our understanding of the what, when, and how of political polarization in American politics.