

# Why are we like this?

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**Polarization, Partisanship, and Identity in U.S. politics**

Professor Victor

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March 25, 2023

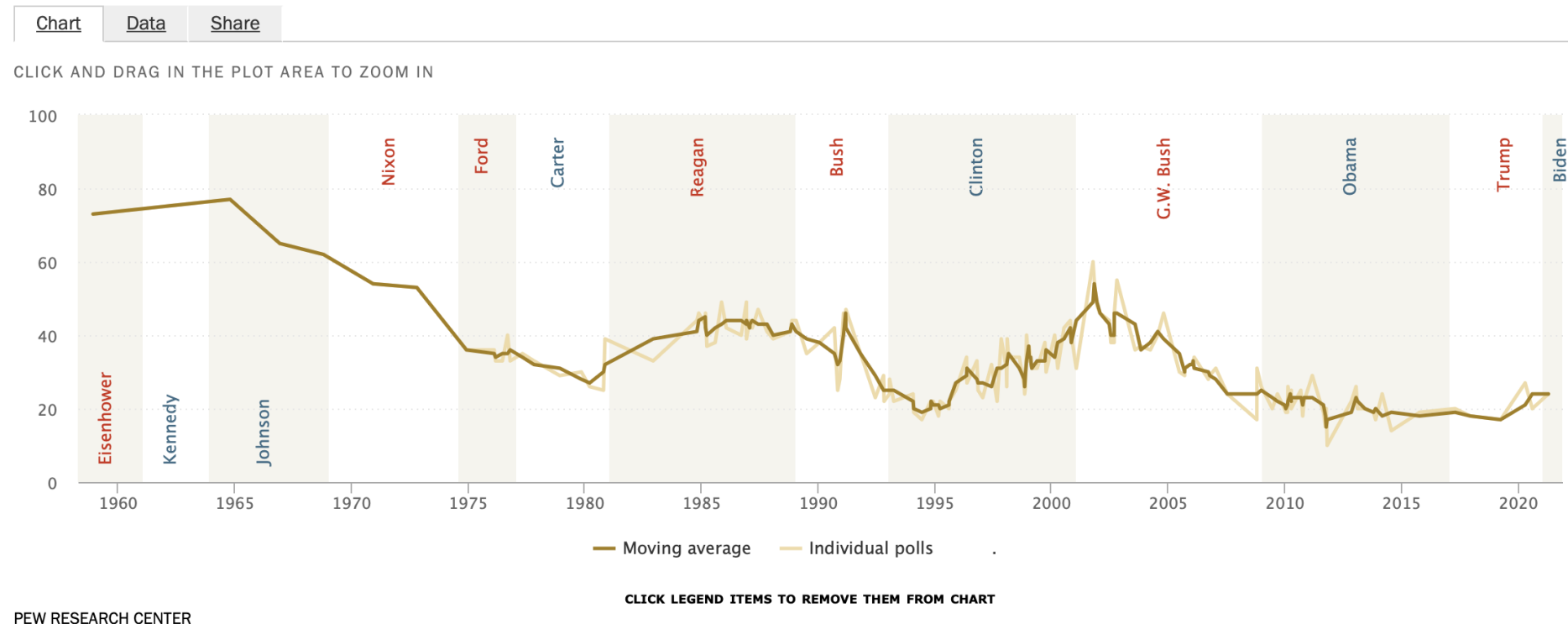


# Americans are decreasingly trustful of government

## Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021

Public trust in government [remains low](#). Only about one-quarter of Americans say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (2%) or “most of the time” (22%).

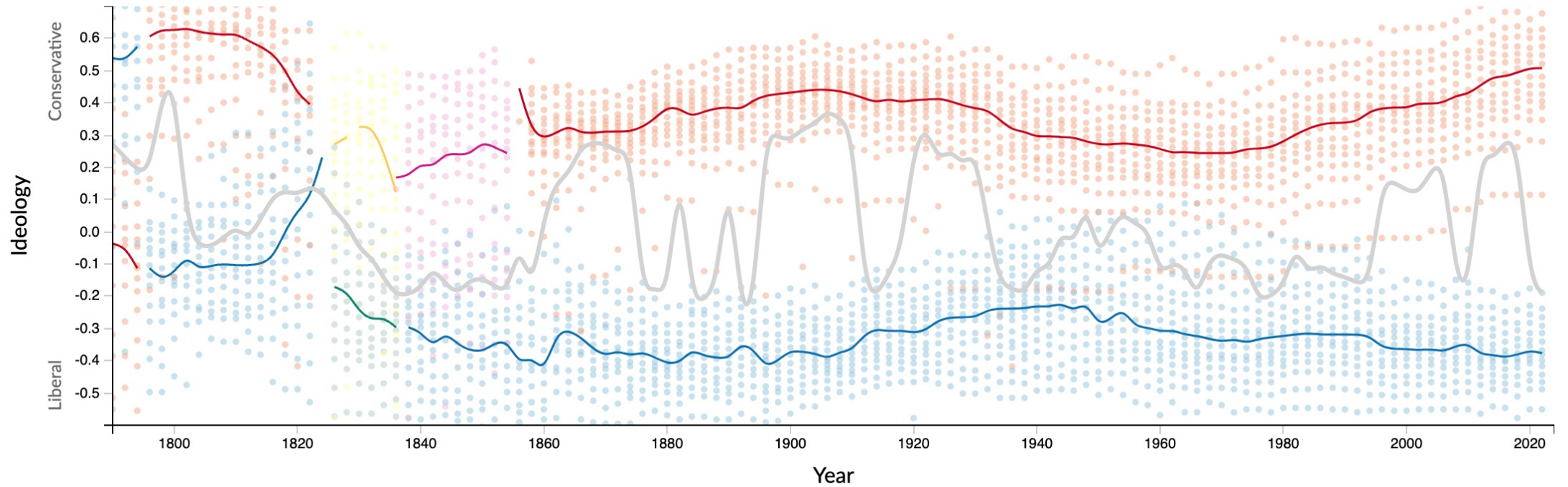
### Public trust in government near historic lows



# Partisans in Congress are growing further apart

## Parties > Parties Overview

### Congress at a Glance: Major Party Ideology



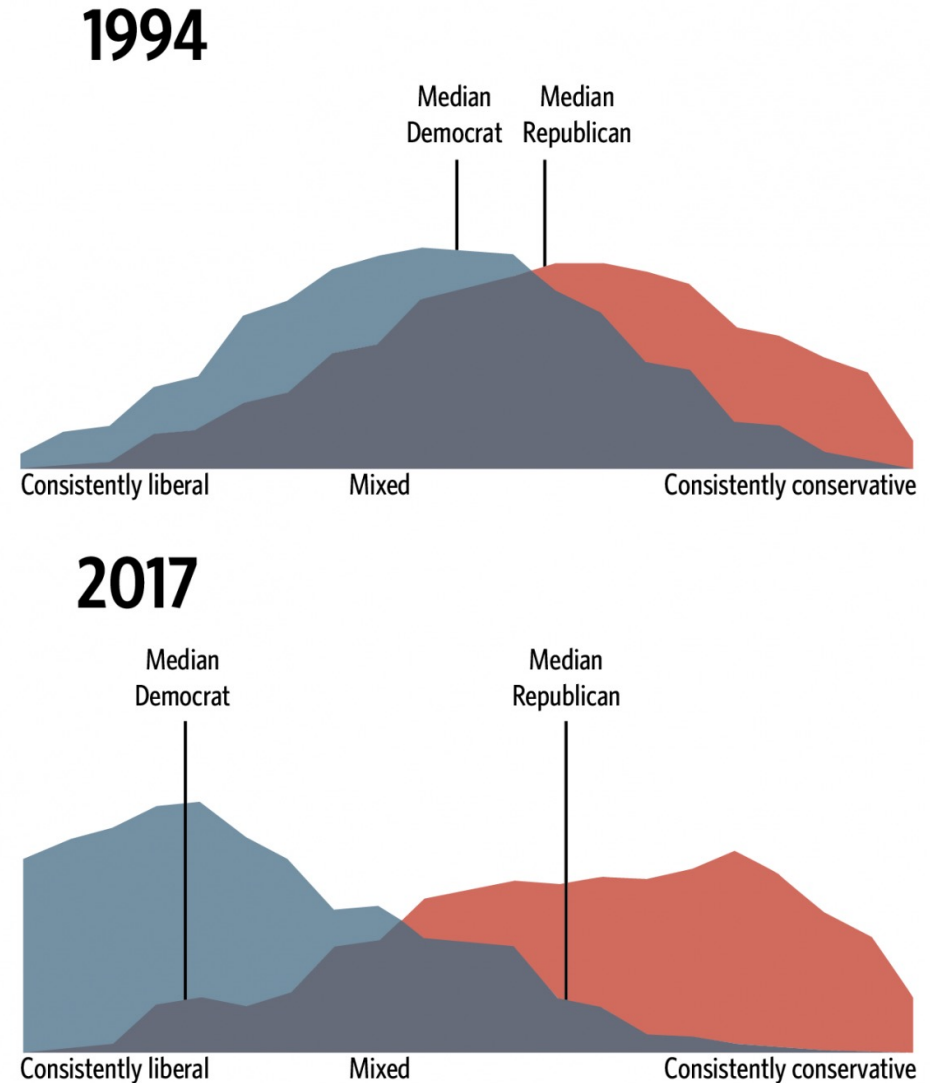
Legend: — Congress Median Ideology — Party Median Ideology • Range of Party Ideology  
Chart shows major parties only. Mouserover for party details.

Lewis, Jeffrey B., Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. "Parties at a Glance." Voteview, March 15, 2022. <https://voteview.com/parties/all>.

The public has also increasingly sorted into partisan groups and grown further apart.

## Political polarization in 1994 and 2017

The viewpoints of the median Democrat and median Republican in 2017 have moved further apart since 1994.



Pew Research Center. "The Shift in the American Public's Political Values." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), October 20, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/interactives/political-polarization-1994-2017/>.

# Why are we like this?

## Causes

- The roots of contemporary polarization go back **50 years**.
- Polarization is rooted in **inequalities**.
- Polarization is driven by political **elites**.

## Consequences

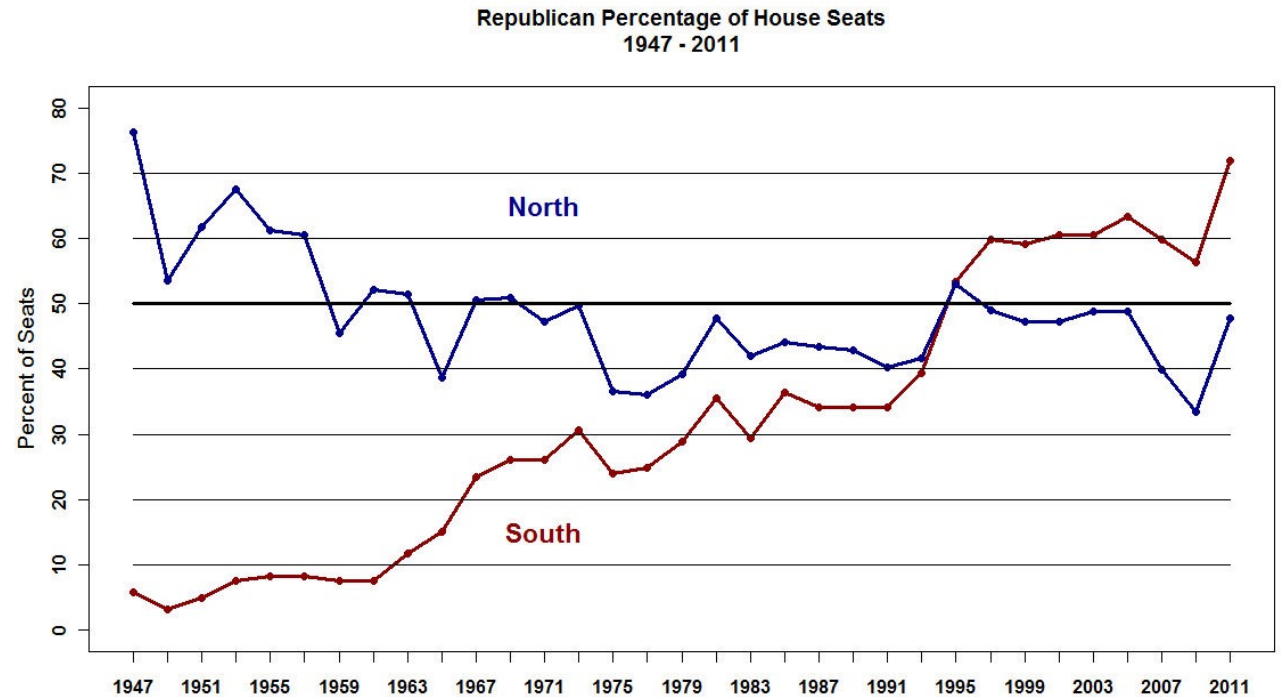
- Human psychological desire for **in-group attachment** makes it hard to stop a polarization trend.
- Political **attitudes** are driven by identities, not policy preferences
- Polarization **degrades** democratic institutions.

# #1 The roots of polarization are deep

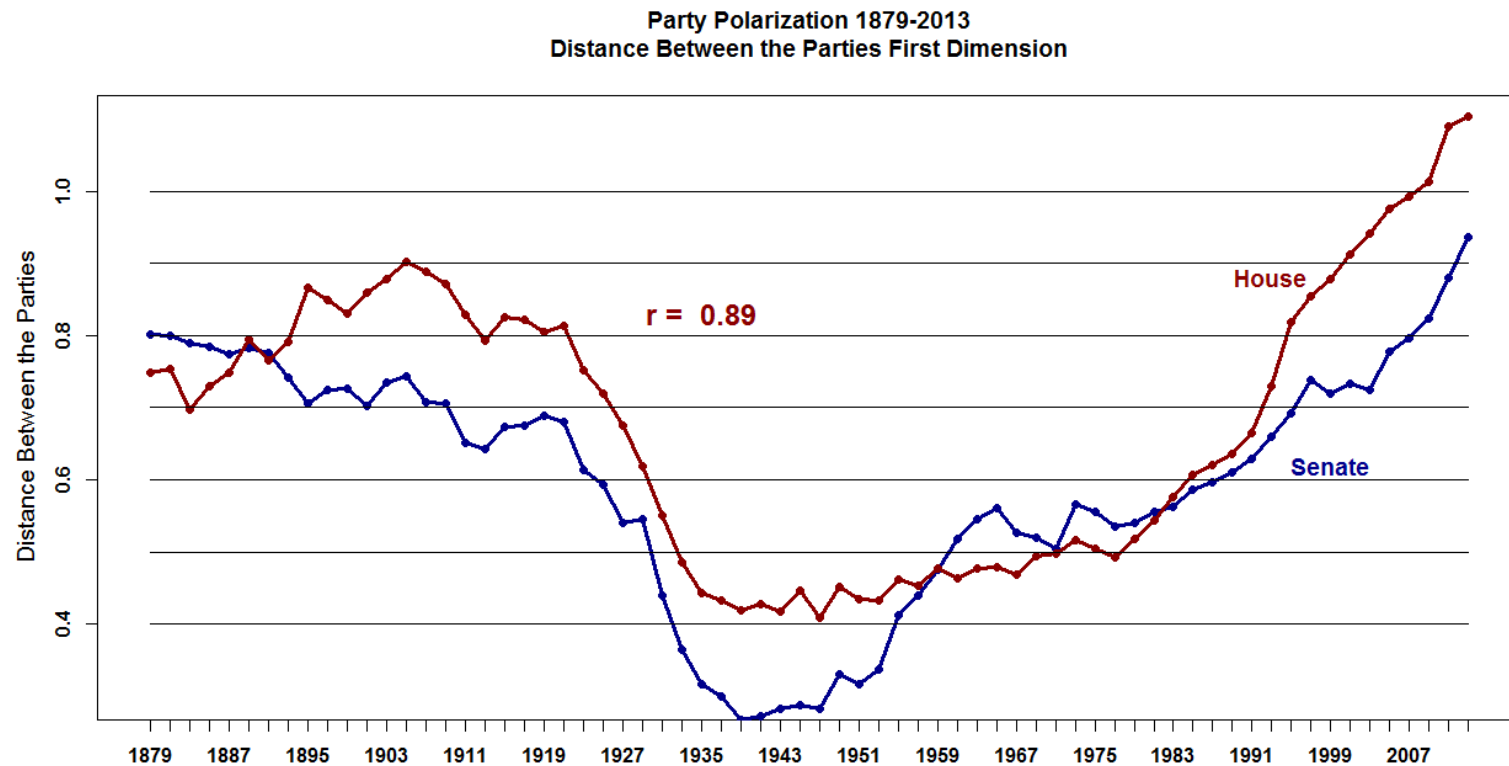
Causes

# SOUTHERN REALIGNMENT

- Whites outnumber blacks in the South.
- Southern whites tend to vote Republican.
- Blacks tend to vote Democratic.
- The majority party in the South switched from Democrat to Republican in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century.



# Congress started polarizing in the 1970s



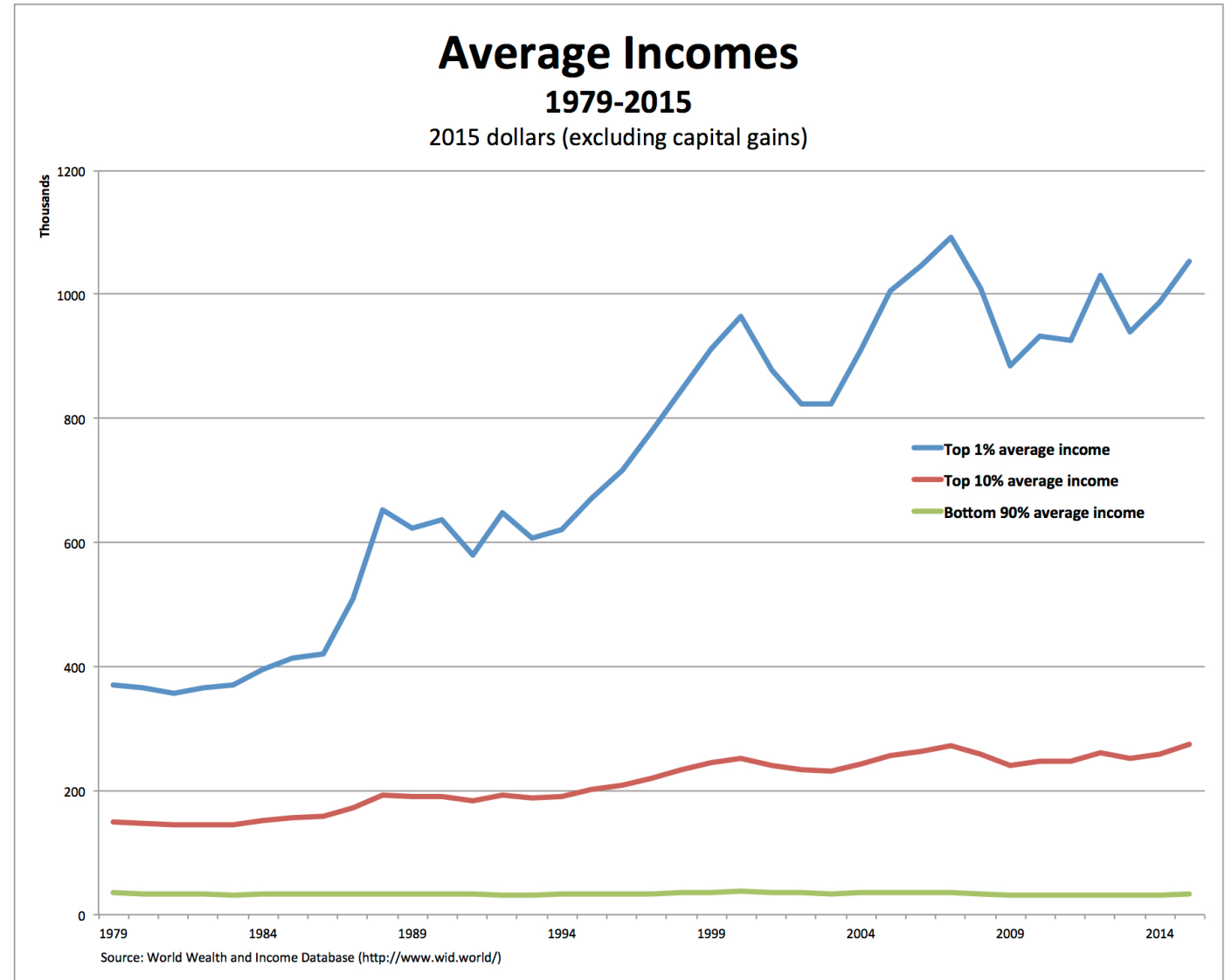


# #2 Polarization is rooted in inequalities

Causes

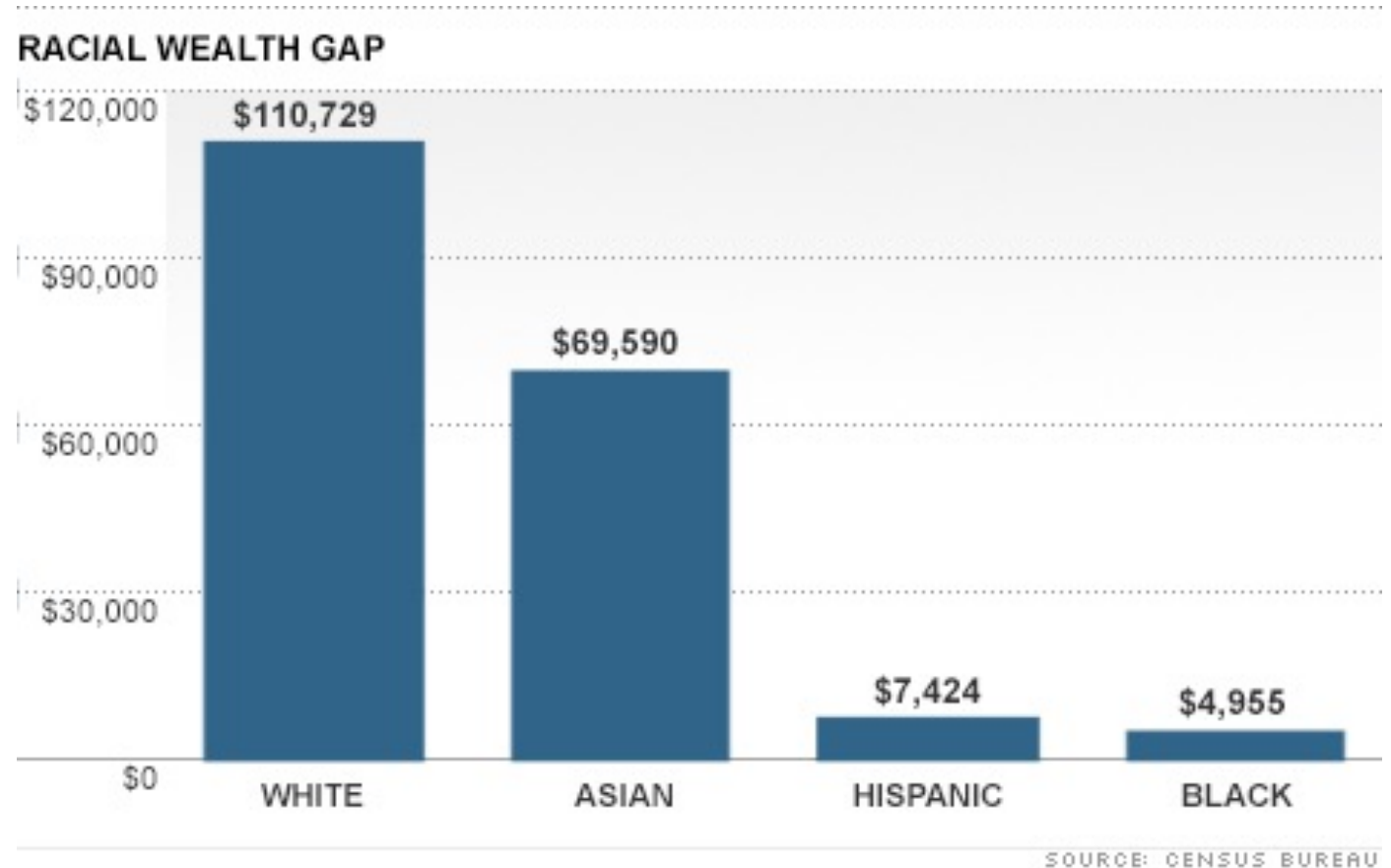
# Economic inequality has grown in the last 50 years

- Since 1979, the wealthiest 1% of earners has seen their income double in size.
- Since 1979, the bottom 90% of earners have seen no average change in income.



# Racial Inequality in Wealth Distribution

- Black families' median and mean wealth is less than 15 percent that of White families.
- Racial inequalities persist in wealth and income.
- Mean net worth is higher than median net worth across all racial categories, indicating the concentration of wealth at the top of the wealth distribution.



Luhby, Tami. 2017. "Worsening Wealth Inequality by Race." *CNNMoney*. Accessed October 11. <http://money.cnn.com/2012/06/21/news/economy/wealth-gap-race/index.htm>.

## Polarization and inequality are correlated

- State-level inequality is also associated with polarization (Garand 2010).
- Policy tends to reflect the preferences of wealthy class over less wealthy (Gilens 2012).

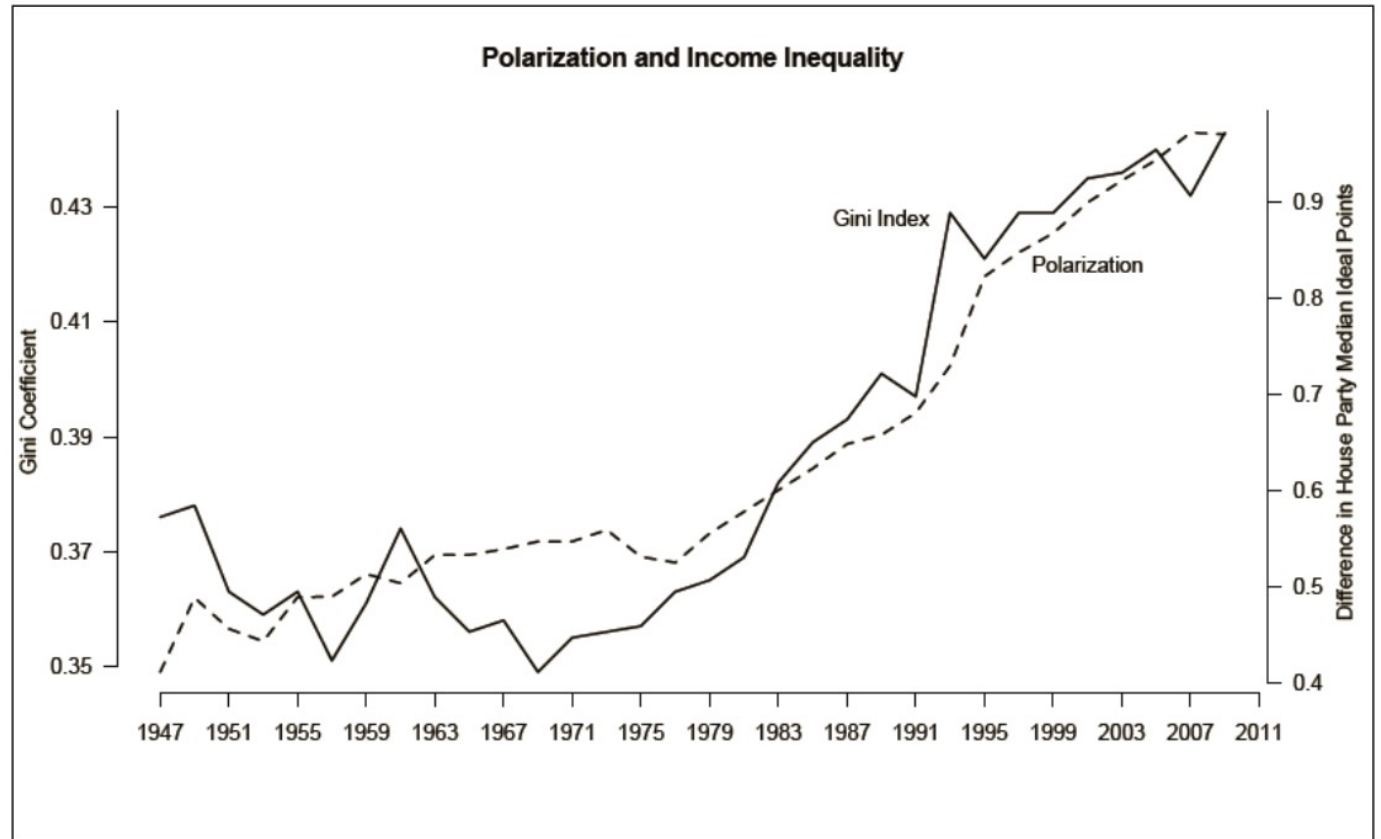


Figure 2.8: *Polarization and Income Inequality*. The y-axis show the difference in median positions for the two parties and the Gini coefficient in the United States. The Gini coefficient is a measure of income inequality that ranges between 0 (perfect income equality) and 1 (one person controls 100% of the nation's income).

Garand, James C. "Income Inequality, Party Polarization, and Roll-Call Voting in the U.S. Senate." *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 4 (October 2010): 1109–28..

Gilens, Martin. *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*. Princeton, N.J : New York: Princeton University Press ; Russell Sage Foundation, 2012.

Mansbridge, Jane, and Cathy Jo Martin, eds. *Negotiating Agreement in Politics: Report of the Task Force on Negotiating Agreement in Politics*. Washington: American Political Science Association, 2013.

McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. MIT Press, 2006.

# #3 Polarization is driven by elites

Causes

Evidence does not support the claim that elites are responding to public demand for greater extremism or intensity

Elites began to polarize before the mass public.

Most people do not hold strong attitudes about politics.

Many people remain quite uninformed about government and policy.

Those who actively engage with politics, are more likely to hold extreme views.

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#1 Human psychology  
makes a polarizing trend  
hard to break

Consequences



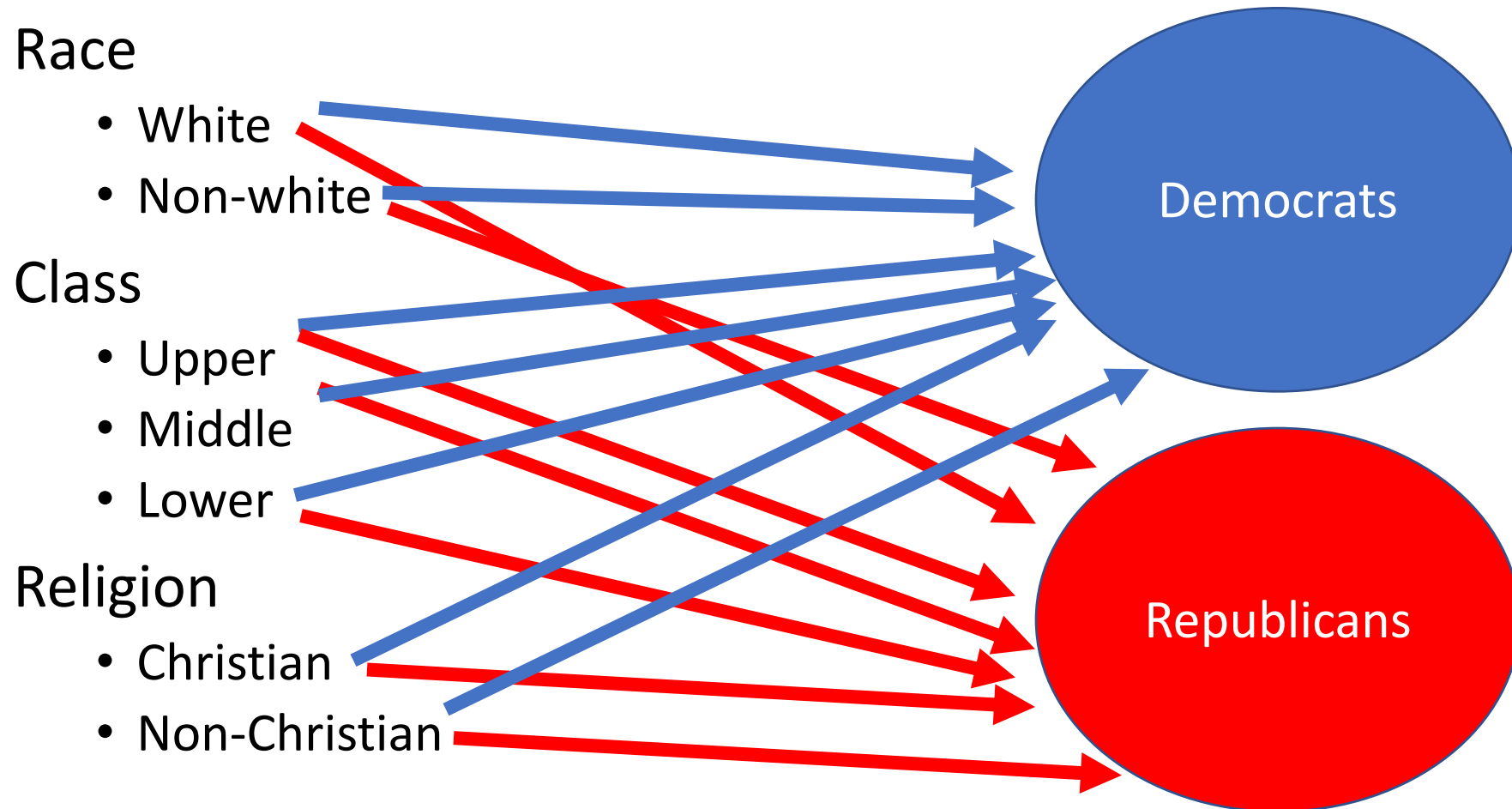
# Social identity theory

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- The Robbers Cave Experiment (1954)
- 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys from Oklahoma City
- Group identity easily established
- Out-group animosity exacerbated by **isolation** and **competition**



# Political identities increase in importance as identities sort by partisanship



If categories equally sort into parties, social identity does not invite political identity awareness.

# Political identities increase in importance as identities sort by partisanship

## Race

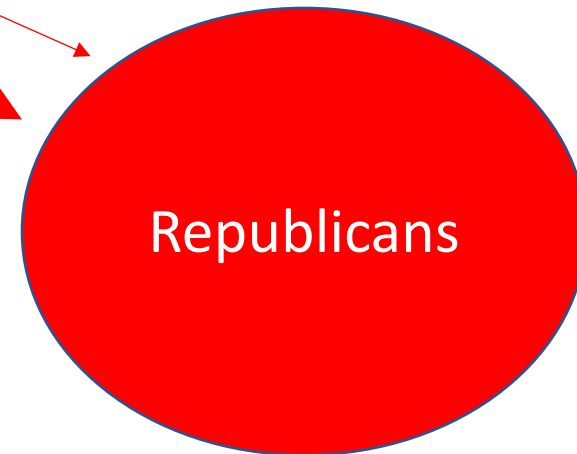
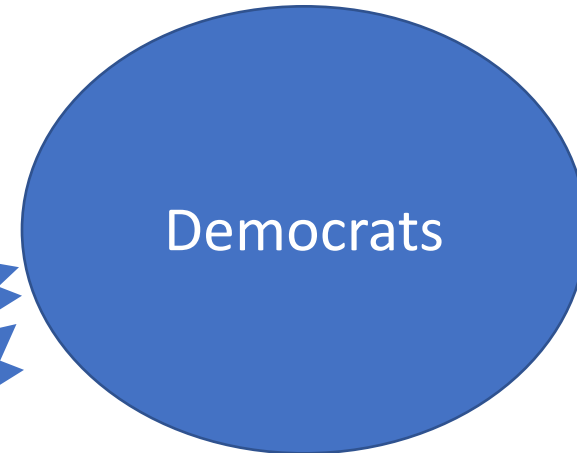
- White
- Non-white

## Class

- Upper
- Middle
- Lower

## Religion

- Christian
- Non-Christian



As social categories sort by partisanship, party identity becomes increasingly important and useful as a signal about overall identity.

# The political psychology of polarization

- Partisanship is an increasingly important part of people's identities because it's a useful signal about who is in your "in-group" and who is in your "out-group."
- Humans have an innate draw to be with others who are like them.
- More diverse networks foster resilience, creativity, innovation; more homogeneous networks promote likeness and security.
- These tendencies are built into our brains and are hard to disrupt.
- Once identity-based polarization begins, it's hard to stop.

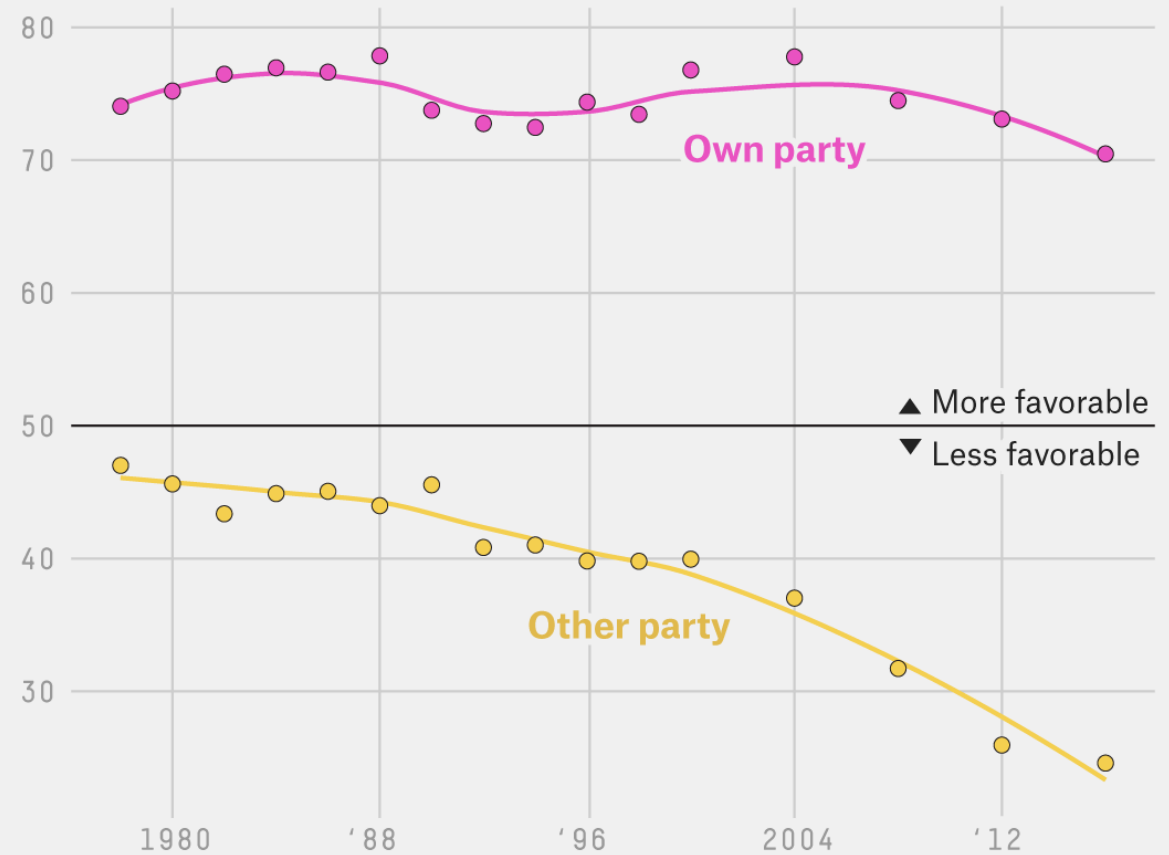
#2 Political attitudes are  
driven by identities, not  
policy preferences

Consequences

# Negative Partisanship

## Americans really don't like the other party

How "favorable and warm" respondents rated their feelings toward their own and the other political party, on a scale of 0 to 100



Respondents who identified as members of neither party were not included in the average.

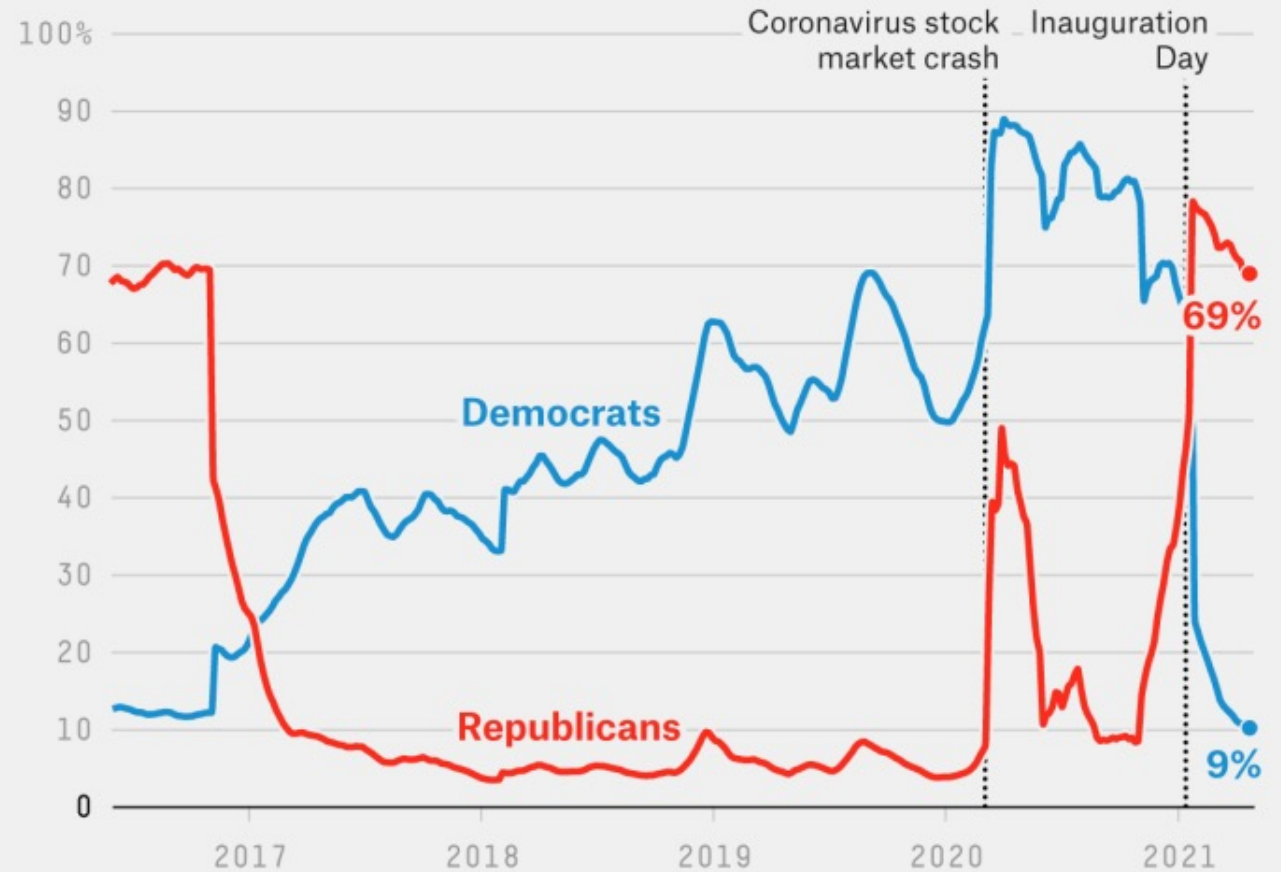
FiveThirtyEight

SOURCES: BOXELL, GENTZKOW, SHAPIRO

# Identity driven policy preferences

## Republicans and Democrats don't agree on the economy

Share of respondents who say they think the economy is getting worse, from June 1, 2016, to May 1, 2021, by party



Responses are from a survey of 498,477 registered voters.

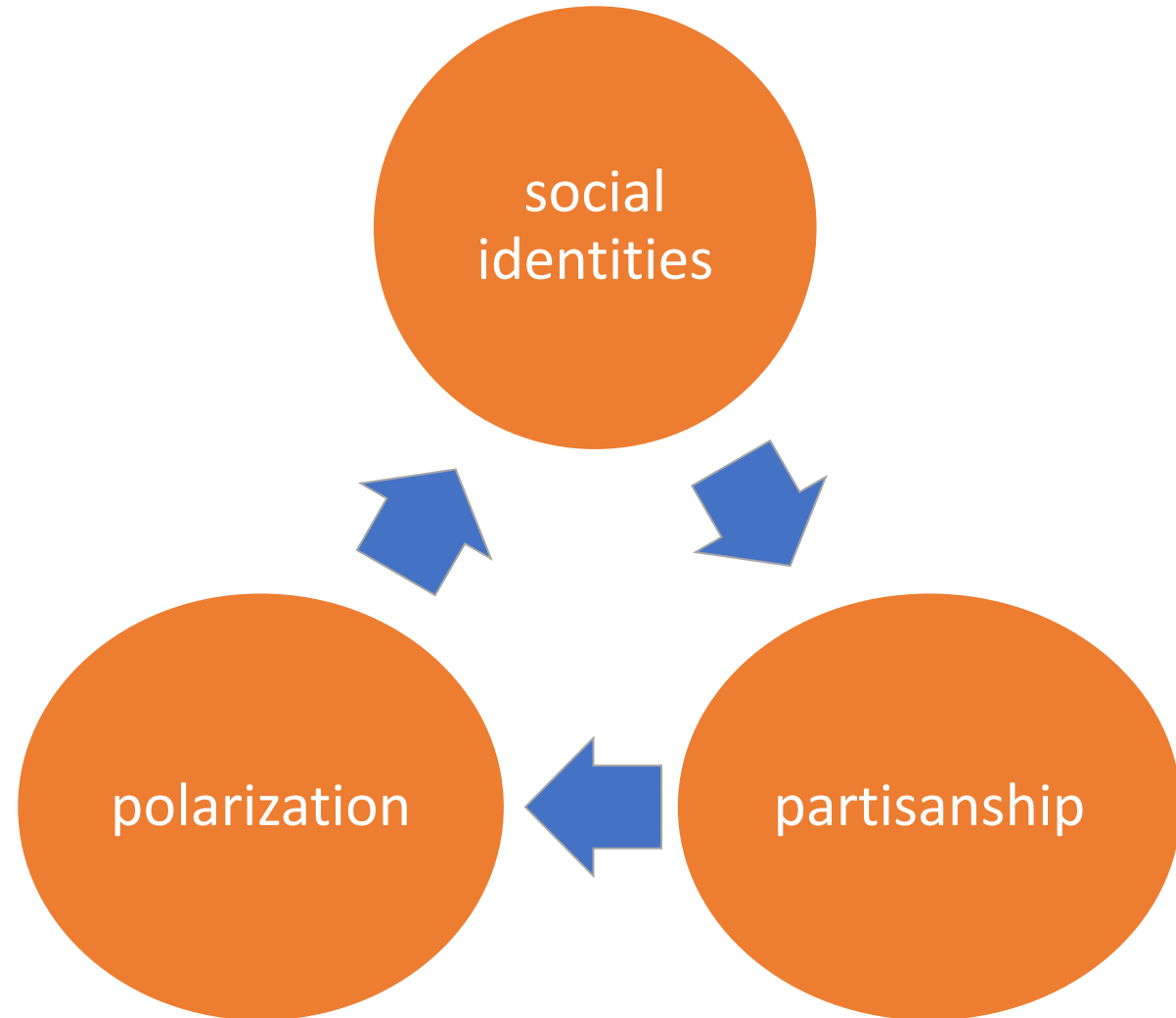
FiveThirtyEight

SOURCE: CIVIQS

# Identities and US partisans

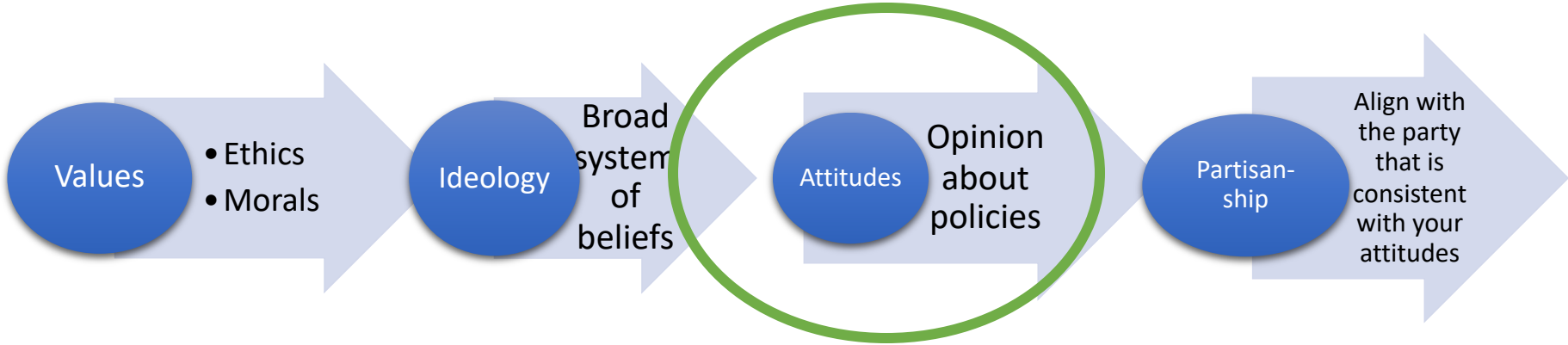
As in-group identities strengthen, voters over-value losses relative to gains.

Partisan identity and polarization become self-reinforcing.

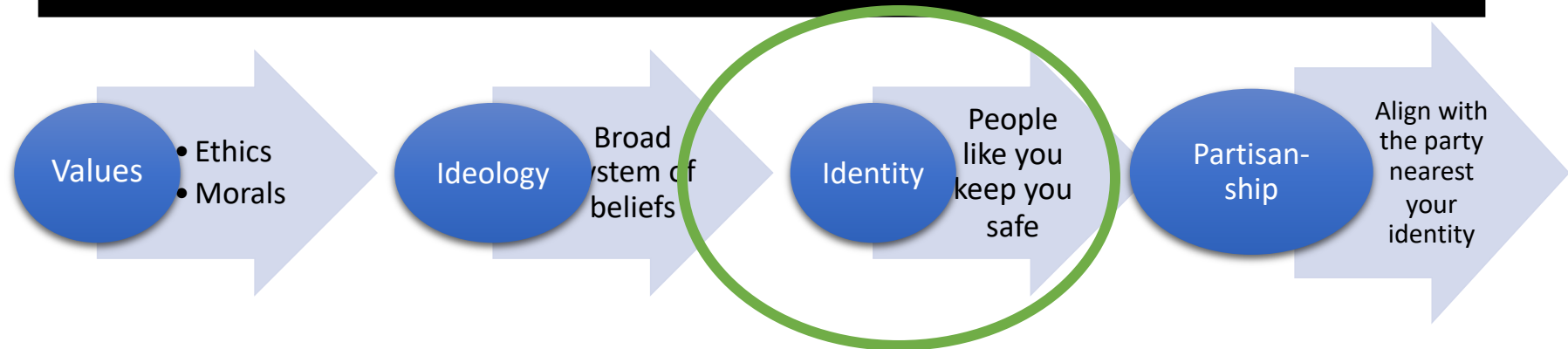




# What it seems like should happen



# What actually happens



# #3 Polarization degrades democratic institutions

Consequences

# Polarization degrades democracy



DEMOCRACY

- Democracy is a form of government that protects individual **rights**, **liberties**, and promotes **prosperity**.
- As partisans polarize, people may devalue democratic institutions.
- Democracy requires:
  - Mutual **respect** among political rivals
  - Mutual **restraint**
- There are fewer incentives to be restrained and show respect when rivals view one another as dangerous.

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