
Has the British Public Depolarized Along With Political Elites? An American Perspective on British Public Opinion

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Abstract

In contrast to the growing elite policy polarization in the United States, the British Labour and Conservative Parties have converged dramatically on economic and social welfare policy over the past two decades. The authors ask the following question: Has there been a parallel depolarization in the British mass public's policy attitudes and partisan loyalties, pointing to a general mechanism that extends beyond the U.S. case? The authors report analyses of election survey data from 1987 to 2001 that document significant declines in the association between British citizens' policy positions and their partisanship (*partisan sorting*). However, they find only modest changes in the dispersion of British respondents' self-placements on the policy scales (*policy extremity*) and in mass *attitude constraint*, defined as the correlations between citizens' positions across different policy issues. These trends in the British public's policy preferences and partisan loyalties are mirror images of the trends in the American public's policy preferences and mass partisanship.

Keywords

Britain, elections, public opinion, polarization, depolarization, representation

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Over the past 15 years, American politics scholars have emphasized political elites' growing policy polarization. It is well documented that, over the past three decades, the proportion of House and Senate members who compile moderate legislative voting records has declined and that the ideological separation between the Republican and Democratic congressional delegations has widened sharply. Furthermore, this elite polarization encompasses both long-term policy debates on social welfare issues and emerging debates on cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage (e.g., Layman & Carsey, 2002; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997). The phenomenon of elite-level polarization has motivated extensive scholarly research that analyzes whether the American mass public has also polarized over this same period (see, e.g., Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2004; Hetherington, 2001; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006; Jacobson, 2007; Levendusky, 2009a, 2009b). By our count, more than 30 articles published in scholarly journals in the past decade analyze questions relating to elite and mass polarization in the United States (for a review, see Hetherington, 2009).

In contrast to American elites' policy polarization, British politics over the past 20 years has witnessed dramatic depolarization, that is, policy convergence,¹ between the elites of the two dominant political parties, Labour and the Conservatives. Beginning with Margaret Thatcher's resignation as Conservative Party leader (and prime minister) in 1990, continuing with "New Labour's" dramatic policy moderation under Tony Blair (which continued under his successor, Gordon Brown), and culminating in the selection of the current Conservative Party leader, the moderate David Cameron, the Labour and Conservative Party elites have entered a period when policy disputes over bread-and-butter issues relating to taxation, income redistribution, nationalization of industry, and social services are far more muted than was the case during the Thatcher era (roughly 1975–1990).² Indeed, this Labour–Conservative policy convergence has become a central campaign message of the Liberal Democrats, a smaller "third party" in British politics.³ In a speech on September 20, 2007, the previous Liberal Democratic leader Sir Menzies Campbell vowed to break up the "cozy consensus" between the two major parties: "Today our party is not only the real alternative. It is the only alternative" (quoted in Coates, 2007). However, with important exceptions to be discussed below, there is little scholarly research analyzing whether the policy depolarization among British political elites is mirrored in the mass public. This question is important since it offers the potential to test, in a reverse direction, a wide body of important literature analyzing the mass polarization present in the American context. This, in turn, can enhance

our understanding of the nature of mass depolarization across different political contexts. Therefore, we ask the following questions: Has the British public depolarized along with political elites, and if so, what form does this depolarization take? And how do trends in British public opinion during the current period of elite *depolarization* compare with the trends that scholars have identified in U.S. public opinion, during the current period of American elites' policy *polarization*?

We report analyses of British General Election Study survey data from 1987 to 2001,⁴ on citizens' partisan loyalties along with their policy preferences relating to social services, nationalization of industry, income redistribution, and trade-offs between inflation and unemployment (the debates that have dominated British politics during most of the postwar period). These analyses support two conclusions. First, the British public *has* depolarized in terms of its partisan loyalties, but *has not* significantly depolarized in terms of its policy attitudes. Specifically, we document, for the first time, a sharp decline in *partisan sorting*, defined as the correlation between British citizens' policy positions and their party identifications. However, we find only modest changes in overall *policy extremity*—defined as the spread of respondents' self-placements on the policy scales—over the 1987–2001 period; nor do we find significant changes in *attitude constraint*, as reflected in citizens' tendencies to align their beliefs across different policy issues.

Second, we conclude that the trends in the British public's economic and social welfare policy attitudes and partisan loyalties, during the current period of elite depolarization, are largely in line with the trends in American public opinion documented in previous research on the current period of elite polarization. Namely, this American-based research concludes that the American public has polarized only modestly in terms of its policy beliefs but has polarized sharply in terms of its partisan loyalties.⁵ In the case of the American public, this partisan polarization takes the form of stronger connections between citizens' policy preferences and their partisanship (partisan sorting)—patterns at the mass level that mirror American elites' policy polarization. In Britain, by contrast, the mass public has exhibited sharp decreases in partisan sorting over the past 20 years, patterns in line with British elites' policy-based depolarization. Moreover, our findings on Britain mirror the conclusions reported in the American politics literature, that on economic and social welfare issues there have been only modest changes in aggregate levels of policy extremity and attitude constraint.

We believe our findings are important for two reasons. First, it is important for students of comparative politics to understand whether British party elites' policy depolarization mirrors a parallel pattern in the mass public. To

our knowledge, ours is the first analysis to examine the broad nature of mass-level (de)polarization relationships outside the U.S. context and to document that, during the current period of elite policy convergence in Britain, the mass public has depolarized sharply in terms of its partisan loyalties but only modestly in terms of its economic and social welfare policy beliefs.⁶ We believe the latter finding is especially noteworthy because, as we discuss below, this nonconvergence of the British public's policy beliefs has an important implication for parties' election strategies: namely, that the electoral "market" for clearly left- and right-wing social welfare policies today has not changed markedly over the past 20 years.

Second, it is striking that our findings on trends in the British public's policy beliefs and partisan ties during a period of elite depolarization mirror trends in American public opinion that have emerged during a period of elite polarization, given that the American and British political systems differ sharply in terms of institutions (presidential vs. parliamentary democracy), party organizational features (the parties are far more centralized in Britain), electoral participation, and mass media communications. Our finding of similar mass-level trends in Britain and the United States during periods of elite polarization—depolarization suggests that the aggregate-level patterns that we observe—namely, that of substantial aggregate-level partisan shifts, but modest policy shifts—may reflect general patterns that will emerge in other advanced industrial societies, whenever political elites significantly converge (diverge) along the dominant axis of policy competition.

With respect to the above arguments, we believe not only that our analyses of mass-level depolarization in post-Thatcher Britain provide a useful comparison to mass polarization in the United States but also that these analyses constitute the *most relevant* comparison. Aside from the United States, Britain is one of the few contemporary Western democracies that have featured dramatic changes in the degree of elite polarization over the past two decades, and, of the countries that have featured such elite policy shifts, Britain is the only country that features two dominant parties (as in the United States) and where moreover we have adequate national election survey data to thoroughly track the dynamics of mass-level (de)polarization.⁷ Given that virtually all of the extant research on mass (de)polarization analyzes the American public, we believe there is great value in drawing systematic comparisons to the British public.

British Elite Policy Convergence: An Overview

The Conservatives' selection of Margaret Thatcher as party leader in 1975 signaled the end of the "Postwar Settlement," a long period of political consensus

during which Labour and Conservative Party elites advocated similar policy visions with regard to support for the welfare state and Keynesian economic policies (including support for nationalization of many key industries). Thatcher, who became prime minister following the Conservative victory in the May 1979 General Election, advocated a sharply different political philosophy centered on reduced state intervention in the economy (including denationalization of many industries), an expanded role for the free market and a diminished role for trade unions, as well as the virtues of personal responsibility, hard work, and entrepreneurship—values that Thatcher shared with the American Ronald Reagan. Seen as a strong leader, particularly following the 1983 Falkland's War, Thatcher competed against Michael Foot's Labour Party in the 1983 General Election. The postwar policy differences between the parties had never been greater. Foot, who was widely viewed as a weak and ineffective leader, shifted Labour's policy image to the left. This, together with internal debates over democratization and Labour's socialist identity, so alienated moderate elements within the party that several prominent party elites abandoned Labour and formed a new party, the Social Democrats, that presented itself as a moderate, "responsible" alternative to Labour.⁸ The 1983 election saw a comfortable Conservative victory, and in the following years Thatcher continued to press her free market agenda of privatization, tax reductions, and (modest) cutbacks in social programs,⁹ policy outputs she married to conservative rhetoric that emphasized her policy disagreements with Labour, a party she characterized as sharply left wing and committed to out-of-date socialism.

The post-1990 elite policy convergence in British politics was primarily the result of four factors. First, Margaret Thatcher resigned as party leader (and prime minister) in November 1990 and was succeeded by a series of leaders (notably John Major from 1990 to 1997, William Hague from 1997 to 2001, Iain Duncan-Smith from 2001 to 2003, and Michael Howard from 2003 to 2005) who presented a more moderate public image, relative to Thatcher. Second, the Conservatives' well-publicized internal policy divisions during the 1990s hampered the party's ability to convey a clear message to the public, thereby blurring the party's image as a strongly right-wing organization (see Denver, 1998). Third, Tony Blair, the Labour Party leader from 1994 to 2007 (and prime minister from 1997 to 2007), dramatically moderated Labour's programmatic emphasis. Blair rebranded the party as "New Labour," a party committed to reaching out to "the vital center" of British politics by advocating lower taxes and reduced welfare dependency; by emphasizing law and order, fiscal prudence, and personal responsibility; and, more generally, by positioning Labour as a party "in the center speaking for the mainstream

majority.”¹⁰ Blair’s most publicized programmatic shifts involved updating the famous “Clause IV” in Labour’s constitution—thereby rescinding Labour’s commitment to common ownership of the means of production—and a public commitment made by Gordon Brown (when Labour was still in opposition) that Labour’s first two budgets would adhere to the spending limits planned by the ruling Conservative Party. Finally, the post-1997 Conservative Party under William Hague (1997–2001) pledged to match Labour’s public spending commitments, further shrinking the Labour–Conservative policy divide. With the election of Conservative leader David Cameron in 2005, who sides with the moderate faction of his party and who has pursued a strategy of moving further toward the center, the dramatic policy divisions between Labour and Conservative Party elites during the 1980s have largely evaporated.¹¹

Trends in British Election Study (BES) respondents’ party placements on the policy scales included in these studies suggest that the British electorate has perceived the striking post-Thatcher elite depolarization. Table 1 reports the mean positions that BES respondents assigned to the Labour and Conservative Parties along the four policy scales that were included in each BES between 1987 and 2001.¹² These mean party placements are along a series of 11-point scales, for which higher numbers denote a more right-wing position (the appendix presents the text of the policy scale questions). These computations show that, over the period 1987–2001, the BES respondents’ mean placements of Labour shifted to the right along each scale, whereas the mean placements of the Conservatives shifted left; that is, voters perceived party policy convergence during this period. Furthermore, this perceived policy convergence was dramatic, in that the policy distances between the parties’ mean perceived positions declined by roughly half along each scale between 1987 and 2001.¹³

Mass Depolarization in Britain: A Policy-Based Perspective

Given that British political elites have depolarized over the past two decades and that the public has perceived this elite policy convergence, has the mass public similarly depolarized during this period? Here, we review evidence that relates to the distribution of citizens’ policy preferences as well as citizens’ tendencies to align their preferences across different policy dimensions—that is, we analyze evidence of *policy-based depolarization* in the mass public. We focus on public opinion on the four, related policy issues that are included in each of the BES surveys between 1987 and 2001: nationalization of industry,

Table 1. Respondents' Mean Placements of the Labour and Conservative Parties, 1987–2001

		1987	1992	1997	2001
Social services	Labour	3.03	2.83	3.59	4.17
	Conservatives	7.16	7.06	6.94	6.21
	Lab–Con gap	4.13	4.23	3.35	2.04
Nationalization	Labour	2.92	3.59	4.66	5.45
	Conservatives	9.14	8.38	8.00	7.50
	Lab–Con gap	6.22	4.79	3.34	2.05
Inflation/unemployment	Labour	2.33	2.98	3.14	3.73
	Conservatives	6.38	6.44	6.16	5.88
	Lab–Con gap	4.05	3.46	3.02	2.15
Redistribution	Labour	2.95	3.08	3.49	4.65
	Conservatives	8.43	7.90	8.21	7.47
	Lab–Con gap	5.48	4.82	4.72	2.82

The numbers reported in the table are the mean positions that British Election Study respondents ascribed to the Labour and Conservative Parties along the issue scales, computed, for each scale in each year, over all respondents who gave a valid party placement on the scale (the appendix gives the wording of the issue scale questions). The rows labeled “Lab–Con gap” report the difference between the mean placements of the Conservative Party and the mean placement of the Labour Party.

income redistribution, support for social services, and trade-offs between unemployment and inflation. Each issue relates to long-standing debates in British politics that pertain to the left–right economic dimension. The BES policy scale questions pertaining to these issues are reproduced in the appendix.

Analyzing policy-based depolarization: An American perspective. Survey-based research on mass polarization in the United States identifies two features that pertain strictly to citizens' policy preferences, without regard to their partisan loyalties. The most basic feature is simply the diversity of citizens' preferences along the focal policy dimensions, as reflected in the standard deviation of survey respondents' self-placements on the relevant policy scales, or, alternatively, the proportion of respondents who self-place at the extremes (i.e., the endpoints) of these scales. According to this perspective, an over-time increase in the proportion of respondents who take extreme positions (or an increase in the standard deviation of respondents' self-placements) may indicate increasing mass polarization. This focus on *policy extremity* is central to the analyses

that many scholars report on mass polarization in the United States (e.g., DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996).

A second American-based perspective on mass polarization pertains to the connections between citizens' positions across different issues, that is, to what Converse (1964) labeled *attitude constraint*. Baldassarri and Gelman (2008, pp. 418-419; also see Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008) emphasize this attribute of citizens' policy beliefs, noting that if citizens align their positions across multiple policy dimensions, the end result may be a polarized public, even if citizens do not take extreme positions on any single dimension. Baldassarri and Gelman analyze attitude constraint in the American public by computing the correlations between survey respondents' self-placements across different policy scales. According to this perspective, if these correlations increase over time, it would constitute evidence of increased attitude constraint—and hence growing polarization—in the mass public.¹⁴

Evidence on policy-based depolarization in Britain: Policy extremity. Tables 2 and 3 report analyses that bear on the degree of policy extremity among the British public between 1987 and 2001, based on BES respondents' self-placements on the policy scales relating to nationalization, redistribution, social services, and unemployment–inflation. With respect to the policy extremism criterion, the data in these tables suggest that during the 1987–2001 period the British mass public depolarized very modestly. Table 2 reports the frequencies of respondents' self-placements on each policy scale for 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001. Recall that each policy scale runs from 1 to 11, with higher self-placements corresponding to more right-wing policy preferences. The table reports the proportions of respondents who self-placed at or near the extreme left, that is, those who self-placed at 1 or 2 on the 1–11 scale; the center–left (3, 4, or 5); the center point of the scale (6); the center–right (7, 8, or 9); and the extreme right (10 or 11). The table also reports the changes in response frequencies across each of these categories between 1987 and 2001, and the right-hand-side (RHS) column reports the proportion of BES respondents who self-placed at or near either extreme on the 1–11 scales, that is, the proportion of respondents who self-placed at 1, 2, 10, or 11. The table frequencies suggest that between 1987 and 2001 the British public shifted noticeably to the left on two of the policy scales, social services and nationalization.¹⁵ However, there were only modest changes in the frequency of extreme respondent self-placements. As reported in the RHS column, between 1987 and 2001 the proportion of respondents giving extreme self-placements changed very little on both the social services scale and the redistribution scale, decreased modestly on the nationalization scale (from 33% to 24%), and decreased sharply on the inflation/unemployment scale (from 57% to 40%). Thus,

Table 2. Frequencies of BES Respondents' Self-Placements on the Policy Scales, 1987–2001

		Respondents' self-placements					
		Extreme left		Center	Extreme right		Extreme self-placement ^a
		1–2 (%)	3–5 (%)	6 (%)	7–9 (%)	10–11 (%)	1–2, 10–11 (%)
Social services	1987	23.7	37.0	26.3	8.4	4.4	28.1
	1992	29.9	37.7	20.2	8.0	4.2	34.1
	1997	35.3	40.9	16.4	5.1	2.4	37.7
	2001	29.0	47.8	15.5	5.7	2.1	31.1
	% change 1987–2001	+5.3	+10.8	–10.8	–2.7	–2.3	+3.0
Nationalization	1987	14.0	18.8	26.8	21.3	19.2	33.2
	1992	18.6	23.5	27.2	17.0	13.8	32.4
	1997	20.1	26.5	30.2	13.6	9.6	29.7
	2001	17.5	33.1	27.4	15.0	7.0	24.5
	% change 1987–2001	+3.5	+14.3	+0.6	–6.3	–12.2	–14.2
Inflation/ employment	1987	51.3	22.6	12.5	7.6	6.0	57.3
	1992	51.0	22.6	13.5	7.4	5.7	56.7
	1997	45.3	27.9	15.4	6.1	5.3	50.6
	2001	36.2	34.6	13.5	11.8	3.9	40.1
	% change 1987–2001	–15.1	+12.0	+1.0	+4.2	–2.1	–17.2
Redistribution	1987	30.5	24.5	14.9	17.3	12.9	43.4
	1992	38.2	23.8	11.1	17.2	9.7	47.9
	1997	40.7	27.3	11.4	12.6	8.0	48.7
	2001	26.6	36.1	10.4	19.0	7.9	34.5
	% change 1992–2001	–3.9	+11.6	–4.5	+1.7	–5.0	–8.9

The numbers reported above represent the percentages of British Election Study (BES) respondents who self-placed in the category, as a percentage of all respondents who gave valid responses (i.e., those who were unable or unwilling to self-place on the policy scale are not included in the calculations). All four of the policy scales run from 1 to 11, with higher numbers denoting more right-wing responses. The texts of the policy scale questions are reported in the appendix.

a. Extreme self-placements are defined as respondents who self-placed at 1, 2, 10, or 11 along the 1–11 policy scales.

during the time period when the British public perceived dramatic policy convergence between Labour and Conservative elites on all four of these policy dimensions, the public itself depolarized significantly on only one

Table 3. Standard Deviations of BES Respondents' Self-placements on the Policy Scales, 1987–2001

	1987	1992	1997	2001	Change, 1987–2001
Social services	2.48	2.55	2.31	2.16	–0.32
Nationalization	3.06	3.05	2.83	2.58	–0.48
Inflation	2.93	2.89	2.79	2.65	–0.28
Redistribution	3.35	3.30	3.09	2.96	–0.39

The numbers reported in the table are the standard deviations of the British Election Study (BES) respondents' self-placements along the issue scales, computed, for each scale in each year, over all respondents who gave a valid self-placement on the scale (the appendix gives the wording of the issue scale questions). The right-hand-side column gives the difference in the standard deviation of respondents' self-placements in 2001 compared to 1987.

dimension, inflation/unemployment. Table 3, which reports the standard deviation of BES respondents' self-placements on each policy scale in each year, supports a similar conclusion. We see that the standard deviations declined modestly on each dimension, that is, by this measure the British public depolarized only modestly on economic and social welfare policy during a period when elites depolarized dramatically.¹⁶

Evidence on attitude constraint in the mass public. Table 4 reports analyses that reflect on changes in the degree of attitude constraint in the British public between 1987 and 2001. The table reports the correlations between BES respondents' positions across pairs of issues, where these positions represent self-placements on the policy scales relating to nationalization, redistribution, social services, and unemployment/inflation. The table gives the correlation for each possible issue pair (six pairs in all) for 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001, and the RHS column reports the change in the correlation for each issue pair between 1987 and 2001. If the correlations diminish over time, this would suggest that citizens' tendencies to align their positions across different policy dimensions decreased over the 1987–2001 period. However, the computations reported in Table 4 do not display such consistent patterns. For three of the six issue pairs, the correlations between citizens' issue positions declined between 1987 and 2001, whereas for the other three issue pairs the correlations increased. With the exception of the correlation between respondents' self-placements on the unemployment/inflation scale and the nationalization scale, which dropped noticeably between 1987 and 2001 (from .28 to .19), none of these issue pair correlations changed significantly between 1987 and 2001.

Table 4. Correlations Between BES Respondents' Self-placements on Pairs of Issues, 1987–2001

	1987	1992	1997	2001	Change 1987–2001
Social services – Nationalization	.27	.28	.21	.24	–.03
Social services – Inflation/ unemployment	.31	.30	.33	.36	+0.05
Social services – Redistribution	.28	.32	.27	.30	+0.02
Naturalization – Inflation/ unemployment	.28	.24	.21	.19	–.09
Naturalization – Redistribution	.41	.37	.27	.34	–.07
Redistribution – Inflation/ unemployment	.31	.28	.25	.32	+0.01

This table reports the correlations between British Election Study (BES) respondents' self-placements on the pairs of policy scales listed in the left-hand-side column, with correlations computed for all respondents who gave valid self-placements on both scales (the question wording for each policy scale is given in the appendix). The right-hand-side column reports the difference between the correlation for the issue pair in 2001 and in 1987.

In toto, we find only weak and inconsistent evidence that the British public depolarized in terms of its economic and social welfare policy attitudes between 1987 and 2001. We document a modest decline in mass *policy extremity* during this period, as measured by the spread of BES respondents' self-placements across the policy scales. However, we find no evidence of a significant decline in mass *attitude constraint*, as reflected in the alignment of BES respondents' self-placements across different policy scales. We conclude that during the 1987–2001 period, when the British public perceived dramatic elite depolarization, the public itself depolarized, at most, quite modestly on policy.

Mass Depolarization in Britain: A Partisan-Based Perspective

Much of the American literature on mass polarization emphasizes the changing relationship between citizens' party loyalties and their policy beliefs.¹⁷ According to this *partisan sorting* perspective, the widening gap between the

Table 5. Changes in BES Respondents' Mean Self-Placements on the Policy Scales, 1987–2001

		1987	1992	1997	2001
Social services	All	4.5	4.1	3.7	3.9
	Lab partisans	3.6	3.1	3.2	3.4
	Con partisans	5.2	5.0	4.4	4.6
	Lab–Con gap	1.6	1.9	1.2	1.2
Nationalization	All	6.4	5.6	5.3	5.1
	Lab partisans	4.4	4.1	4.6	4.5
	Con partisans	7.9	7.0	6.4	6.1
	Lab–Con gap	3.5	2.9	1.8	1.6
Inflation/unemployment	All	3.5	3.5	3.6	4.0
	Lab partisans	2.3	2.8	3.0	3.5
	Con partisans	4.5	4.1	4.4	4.7
	Lab–Con gap	2.2	1.3	1.4	1.2
Redistribution	All	5.0	4.5	4.1	4.8
	Lab partisans	3.1	2.8	3.0	3.8
	Con partisans	6.7	6.1	5.9	6.5
	Lab–Con gap	3.6	3.3	2.9	2.7

The numbers reported above represent the British Election Study (BES) respondents' mean self-placements on the policy scales relating to social services, nationalization of industry, trade-offs between unemployment and inflation, and income redistribution. Mean self-placements are given for all respondents ("All"), for all respondents who reported that they identified with the Labour Party ("Lab partisans"), and for all respondents who reported that they identified with the Conservative Party ("Con partisans"). The figures given in the rows labeled "Lab–Con gap" report the differences between the mean self-placements of Conservative and Labour partisans, on the policy scale. All four scales are from 1 to 11, with higher numbers denoting more right-wing responses. The texts of the policy scale questions are reported in the appendix.

ideologies of Democratic and Republican party elites has prompted a sorting of Democratic and Republican partisans' policy preferences in the electorate, that is, the difference between the mean policy preferences of rank-and-file Democratic partisans versus Republican partisans has increased over time (see, e.g., Abramowitz & Saunders, 1998; Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006; Hetherington, 2009). The Americanists' findings of mass-level partisan alignment and partisan sorting, in response to elite-level polarization, suggest that the British Labour and Conservative Party elites' policy depolarization over the past 20 years might have prompted the opposite response in the British public. Namely, we might expect to see a change in the relationship between the policy preferences of Labour and Conservative identifiers (partisan sorting).

Table 6. Correlation Between BES Respondents' Policy Preferences and Their Scores on the Lab–Cons Thermometer Rating Differential Variable

	1987	1992	1997	2001	Change, 1987–2001
Social services	.32 (3,649)	.37 (1,682)	.25 (3,421)	.22 (2,843)	-.10
Nationalization	.55 (3,589)	.44 (1,646)	.27 (3,348)	.29 (2,283)	-.26
Inflation/unemployment	.33 (3,693)	.23 (1,697)	.22 (3,340)	.21 (2,294)	-.12
Redistribution	.49 (3,656)	.45 (1,677)	.39 (3,422)	.37 (2,292)	-.12

The computations reported in the table represent the correlation between the British Election Study (BES) respondents' self-placements on the focal policy scale and their net Conservative–Labour thermometer rating, defined as the difference between the respondent's thermometer rating of the Conservative Party and her or his rating of Labour (see Note 19). Each correlation reported in the table was computed over all respondents in that year who self-placed on the focal policy scale, and who also gave valid thermometer ratings of both parties. The numbers in parentheses denote the number of respondents used in computing the correlation coefficient.

We begin with analyses of BES data that pertain to partisan sorting, as reflected in the differences between the policy preferences of Labour and Conservative partisans. Table 5 reports trends in partisan sorting over time on the policy scales relating to social services, nationalization, inflation/unemployment, and income redistribution. For each policy scale, in each election year, the table reports the mean self-placement computed for all respondents, for all Conservative partisans, and for all Labour partisans.¹⁸ We also report the policy distance between the mean self-placements of Conservative and Labour Party identifiers (the *Labour–Conservative partisan gap* variable), which provides a useful index of the degree of partisan sorting on the policy scale. To the extent that the British public depolarized between 1987 and 2001, we might expect the Labour–Conservative partisan gap to diminish during this period. The computations reported in Table 5 support this expectation. The mean distance between Labour and Conservative partisans decreased on each policy scale. In addition, on three of the four scales this mass partisan convergence was dramatic, with the policy gap between Conservative and Labour identifiers diminishing by roughly 50%. This depolarization by the parties in the electorate is comparable to the depolarization of the parties in parliament, as perceived by the British electorate (see Table 1).

Table 6 reports additional computations that bear on partisan sorting in the British mass public between 1987 and 2001. The computations are the Pearson correlations between the BES respondents' self-placements on the focal policy scale and their *net Conservative-Labour thermometer rating*, defined as the difference between the respondent's thermometer rating of the Conservative Party and her or his rating of Labour.¹⁹ The RHS column reports the change in the computed correlation between 1987 and 2001. Each correlation coefficient in the table was computed over all respondents who self-placed on the focal policy scale in the given year and who also gave valid thermometer ratings of both major parties. (The numbers in parentheses denote the number of respondents used in computing the correlation coefficient). To the extent that these correlations diminish over time, this would suggest that the connection between respondents' policy beliefs and their party evaluations has weakened and that, in this sense, the British public has depolarized. The computations reported in Table 6 support this expectation. The correlations between BES respondents' self-placements on the policy scales and their party evaluations have diminished sharply over time, across all four policy dimensions.

Discussion and Conclusion

During a period of dramatic elite depolarization on economic and social welfare policy, we conclude that the British public *did not* depolarize dramatically in terms of its policy preferences on these issues but *did* depolarize sharply in terms of its partisan loyalties. Specifically, we document only modest declines in the extremity of British citizens' policy beliefs, and we find no significant declines in their attitude constraint as reflected in the alignments of citizens' positions across different policy dimensions. By contrast, we document a sharp decline in *partisan sorting*, in that the Labour and Conservative partisans' policy preferences converged sharply between 1987 and 2001, and the relationship between attitudinal position and party feeling thermometer differentials saw a commensurate and dramatic decline. These partisan-based results suggest that, on economic and social welfare policy, the British party system changed fundamentally between 1987 and 2001, at both the elite and mass levels: The 1987 party system featured left- and right-wing parties in parliament supported by left- and right-wing parties in the electorate, but the 2001 party system featured center-left and center-right parties in parliament supported by center-left and center-right parties in the electorate.

As stated in the introduction, we believe our analyses of mass-level depolarization in post-Thatcher Britain provide the most apt feasible survey-based comparison to mass polarization in the United States. Given that U.S. scholars have presented evidence that mass-level polarization in the United States is

primarily a *response* to elite polarization (see, e.g., Carsey & Layman, 2006; Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009a, 2009b),²⁰ we therefore consider the following question: To the extent that trends in the British public's policy preferences and partisan loyalties reflect an elite-driven process, how do our findings on the British public's responses to elite-level *depolarization* compare with the findings that previous studies have reported on the American public's responses to elite *polarization*? This question has no simple answer because there is a wide-ranging, sometimes heated debate among American politics scholars over the long-term trends in the U.S. public's policy preferences and party attachments (see, e.g., the exchange between Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008, and Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008). However, we see important parallels between our findings on the British electorate and the findings that many scholars report on the American public. First, there is strong evidence that the members of both mass publics have perceived the sharp changes in elite-level polarization in their countries, as reflected in the dramatic shifts in survey respondents' party placements (we documented these perceptions for Britain in Table 1 above; for evidence on the U.S. public, see Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009b). Second, there is near-universal scholarly agreement that the American public has sorted itself along partisan lines during the current period of elite-level polarization, that is, that Democratic and Republican partisans' policy preferences diverge much more today than was the case 20 years ago (see, e.g., Hetherington, 2009, Figure 5). This finding on the American public mirrors our finding that the British parties in the electorate have converged on policy, along with the parties in parliament. Third, there is a widespread (but not unanimous) scholarly consensus that the American public has not significantly polarized in terms of its policy preferences on economic and social welfare issues,²¹ a conclusion that mirrors our findings that the British public has not depolarized dramatically on these issues according to either the policy extremity criterion or the attitude constraint criterion.

To the extent that the British public's change over time can be interpreted as a response to elite depolarization, mirroring the American public's responses to elite polarization, our conclusions have important implications for politics outside of Britain. Most notably, our findings suggest that the aggregate-level patterns that we document—namely, that of substantial mass-level partisan-based changes but only modest policy-based changes—reflect general patterns that will emerge in other advanced industrial societies, whenever political elites significantly converge (diverge) along the dominant axis of policy competition. In this regard, our third conclusion, that the British public depolarized only modestly on social welfare policy during the

post-Thatcher period of elite depolarization, provides particularly strong support for projecting (the lack of) policy-based effects in other countries. For in contrast to the American context, which features relatively heterogeneous and decentralized political parties, the policy messages that the British public receives are delivered by more unified, centralized, political parties—a setting that seemingly enhances British party elites' opportunities to shape their supporters' policy preferences. Yet we identify only modest changes in mass-level polarization on social welfare policy in Britain, during a period of dramatic elite convergence. We believe that this (non)finding on British politics thereby calls into question party elites' abilities to shape public opinion on issues relating to social welfare policy.²²

Finally, our finding that the British public has *not* significantly depolarized in terms of its policy beliefs has an important implication for parties' election strategies: namely, that it may be electorally feasible for one (or both) of the major parties to propose clearly right- or left-wing policies at some future date. Our findings suggest that the electoral "market" for noncentrist economic and social welfare policies has not declined significantly over the past 20 years. We believe this point is worth noting, given the current conventional wisdom that office-seeking British parties must hew to the "centre ground." Although Tony Blair's "New Labour" Party indeed enjoyed sustained electoral success while promoting moderate social policies, it is equally true that Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party enjoyed comparable success while espousing a sharply right-wing policy agenda. Here, too, we see parallels with the United States, for although several recent academic and popular analyses argue that American mass polarization makes it attractive for parties to pursue a "base" strategy predicated on sharply noncentrist policies that motivate ideologues to turn out to vote—an approach that many analysts ascribed to Karl Rove, President George W. Bush's deputy chief of staff—this "energize the base" approach has come under increasing fire from Republican politicians and commentators, who question whether there are sufficient numbers of sharply right-wing voters to support this strategy. Our finding that the British public has not significantly depolarized in terms of the spread of its policy beliefs suggests a mirror image conclusion about Britain: namely, that British politicians should be equally cautious about concluding that the British public is so depolarized that only a "centre ground" strategy is viable.

To our knowledge, the conclusions summarized above constitute the first cross-national comparison of the partisan- and policy-based dynamics of mass publics confronting dramatic elite policy (de)polarization. We hope to eventually extend this comparison to additional mass publics. For now, however, Britain in the post-Thatcher era constitutes an apposite test. Our comparison suggests that the mass public's responses to elite policy depolarization in

Britain shares striking similarities to the public's response to elite polarization in the United States, a conclusion that has important implications for parties' election strategies and for mass–elite policy linkages.

Appendix

Wording of British Election Study Policy Scales and Thermometer Questions

Equalisation of incomes (redistribution): Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are. And other people have views somewhere in-between. Please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about redistributing income.

1 = *Make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal*;
11 = *Be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are*

Nationalisation/privatisation: Some people feel that government should nationalise many more private companies. Other people feel that government should sell off many more nationalised industries. And other people have views somewhere in-between. Please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about nationalisation and privatisation.

1 = *Nationalise many more private companies*; 11 = *Sell off many more nationalised industries*

Inflation/unemployment: Some people feel that getting people back to work should be the government's top priority. Other people feel that keeping prices down should be the government's top priority. And other people have views somewhere in-between. Please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about unemployment and inflation.

1 = *Getting people back to work should be the government's top priority*; 11 = *Keeping prices down should be the government's top priority*

Tax/spend (social services): Some people feel that government should put up taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services. Other people feel that government should cut taxes a lot and spend much less on health and social services. And other people have

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

views somewhere in-between. Please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about taxes and government spending.

1 = *Government should increase taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services*; 11 = *Government should cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services*'

Feeling thermometer (1987, 1992, 1997): Please choose a phrase from this card to say how you feel about the Labour/Conservative Party?

1 = *strongly against*, 2 = *against*, 3 = *neither in favour nor against*, 4 = *favour*, 5 = *strongly favour*

Feeling thermometer (2001): On a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about the Labour/Conservative Party?

0 = *strongly dislike* thru 10 = *strongly like*

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Notes

1. We use the terms *policy convergence* and *policy depolarization* interchangeably.
2. Margaret Thatcher was selected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 and became prime minister following the Conservatives' victory in the May 1979 General Election. She resigned her position as party leader (and prime minister) in November 1990.

3. The Liberal Democrats, whose policy positions resemble those of the Labour Party (although the Liberal Democrats place greater emphasis on education and the environment), typically win around 20% of the national vote, whereas over the past two decades the Labour and Conservatives' vote shares have been in the 30% to 45% range. However, because of the operation of Britain's plurality voting system the Liberal Democrats' seat shares have consistently lagged far behind their vote shares.
4. The years for which comparable measures are available in British Election Studies.
5. However, we note that this summary does not represent the unanimous conclusion of American politics scholars, who disagree sharply over whether (and in what ways) the mass public has polarized. We discuss these issues in the concluding section.
6. But see Green (2007) for findings on the British public's partisan responses to elite depolarization.
7. Such analyses require a series of national election studies that obtain respondents' self-placements and their party placements across multiple policy scales and where, moreover, the policy issues included in these surveys (along with the question wordings) remain consistent across several national elections. In this regard, although the Spanish and French party systems have arguably featured significant elite policy convergence over the past two decades, the available election survey data for these countries do not meet these requirements. The only additional useful comparison we have identified is the Dutch party system during the 1980s and 1990s, a period for which we have national election study data that meet our requirements, and where the two largest parties (the PVDA and the CDA) converged sharply on policy. We have replicated all of the analyses we report below for Britain on the Dutch data and find that they support identical substantive conclusions as the British data. We report these analyses on our web site (<http://ps.ucdavis.edu/People/faculty/jfadams/>).
8. In 1988, the Social Democrats merged with the Liberal Party to form the Liberal Democratic Party.
9. We note that in this area the Conservative government's policy outputs did not match Thatcher's rhetoric, in part because of public opposition to proposed cuts in social programs.
10. Tony Blair speaking to the British-American Chamber of Commerce in New York, as quoted in the *Guardian*, April 12, 1996.
11. The trends described above emerge in over-time analyses of the policy statements in the Labour and Conservative Parties' election manifestos reported by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), which provides codings of the Labour and Conservative Parties' election manifestos during the postwar period (see Budge,

- Klingemann, Volkens, Tannenbaum, & Bara, 2001). In the CMP framework, coders determine parties' Left-Right emphases via content analyses of their election manifestos, by isolating "quasi-sentences" in each party's manifesto and pairing these quasi-sentences with policy categories (e.g., law and order, national defense, etc.) using a preestablished classification scheme. Over the course of the last three national elections (1997, 2001, and 2005), the CMP codings register dramatic ideological convergence between the parties. In addition, this elite policy convergence emerges in analyses of the mean self-placements of candidates and MPs on the policy scales included in the British Candidate/Representation Studies of 1997, 2001, 2005.
12. The pre-1987 versions of the British Election Study (BES) policy scales have different endpoints and (in some cases) dramatically different question wordings, so that they are not comparable to the 1987-2001 policy scale questions. In addition, we note that the 2001 and the 2005 BES cross-sectional studies did not include many policy scale questions (only tax-spend and a left-right question that was not asked in prior surveys), which is why we restrict our attention to the 1987-2001 period. For 2001, we rely on the second wave of the 1997-2001 panel study, which contained policy scale questions comparable with those included in the 1987, 1992, and 1997 cross-sectional studies.
 13. In supplementary materials posted on our web site (<http://ps.ucdavis.edu/People/faculty/jfadams/>), we report multivariate analyses that track the same over-time trends in BES respondents' party placements that are evident in the cross-tabulations that we report in Table 1. These analyses, in which we control for respondents' sociodemographic characteristics and party identification, support the same substantive conclusion as Table 1, namely, that respondents perceived significant party policy convergence over the time period 1987-2001.
 14. The authors refer to this phenomenon as issue alignment.
 15. The BES respondents' mean self-placement on the social services scale shifted from 6.4 in 1987 to 5.1 in 2001, and on nationalization the mean self-placement shifted from 4.5 to 3.9 between 1987 and 2001 (see Table 6).
 16. In supplementary materials posted on our web site (<http://ps.ucdavis.edu/People/faculty/jfadams/>), we report multivariate analyses that support substantive conclusions about BES respondents' policy-based depolarization that are the same as the conclusions we reach based on the cross-tabulations that we report in Tables 2 and 3.
 17. We note that an alternative partisan-based perspective analyzes changes in the incidence and strength of degree of mass partisanship, with U.S. scholars arguing that elite polarization in the United States has clarified the parties' positions for rank-and-file citizens, which has in turn prompted an increase in mass partisanship (see, e.g., Abramowitz & Saunders, 1998; Hetherington, 2001, 2009;

Levendusky, 2009b). This argument implies that we should observe a weakening of partisan ties in Britain in response to party elites' policy convergence. On our website we report analyses of BES data that support this *partisan dealignment* hypothesis, a finding that is in line with previous research by Heath, Jowell, and Curtice (2001) and Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, and Whiteley (2004, 2009). We note, however, that we hesitate to attribute this observed partisan dealignment in Britain to elite depolarization, given that these dealignment trends extend across most Western European democracies (see, e.g., Dalton, 2006, chap. 9), including those where party elites have not converged over time.

18. Party identification categories were computed using the question, "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as . . . [Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat . . .] or what?" Note that these comparisons were also computed while controlling for strength of party identification, and the patterns of partisan-based polarization persisted.
19. The thermometer rating scales for the parties range from 1 to 5, with higher numbers denoting greater approval, and thus the value of the *net Conservative–Labour thermometer rating* variable ranges from -4 to $+4$. The appendix provides the wording of the party thermometer questions.
20. In this regard, we note that research by Carsey and Layman (2006), Goren (2005), and Highton and Kam (2008) presents individual-level evidence that American citizens update their policy beliefs and/or their partisanship in response to parties' policy positions, findings that support the hypothesis that mass polarization in the United States is (at least partly) a response to elite polarization.
21. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2004, 2008) are prominent exponents of the view that Americans have not shifted systematically toward more extreme policy preferences, arguing that on most politically salient policy questions citizens' views remain moderate (also see DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996; Evans, 2003), whereas Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) present evidence that attitude constraint in the American public has not changed significantly over the past 20 years. For a dissenting view see Abramowitz and Saunders (2008).
22. See Sniderman and Stiglitz (n.d.) for ingenious experimental research that calls into question political parties' abilities to shift their supporters' positions on policy issues. We also emphasize again that our findings on Britain apply to debates over the economic and social welfare policies that have dominated elite discourse during the postwar period and do not necessarily extend to other policy dimensions. Although American politics scholars have extensively analyzed mass polarization with respect to emerging issues such as abortion, women's issues, gay rights, and the environment (see, e.g., Adams, 1997; Lindaman & Heider-Markel, 2002; Wolbrecht, 2000), we cannot document long-term trends in British citizens' convergence–divergence on these issues because these items do not appear in consistent form across the BES.

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