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Who moves? Elite and mass-level depolarization in Britain, 1987–2001

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades the British Labour and Conservative parties have depolarized on economic and social welfare policy, at both the elite and mass levels. We ask the question: Does mass-level depolarization in Britain extend throughout the electorate, or is it confined primarily to the stratum of affluent, educated, and politically engaged citizens? We report longitudinal analyses of British Election Study respondents' policy beliefs and partisan loyalties over the period 1987–2001, and find that depolarization extends across all subgroups in the electorate, as do perceptions of elite depolarization. These effects are (moderately) more pronounced among the electoral subgroups of highly educated, affluent, and politically informed citizens. The findings have important implications for elite representation of voters' policy preferences, and for differences in representation patterns between Britain and the United States.

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1. Introduction

Scholars of American politics have emphasized the importance of party elites' policy polarization for changes to the U.S. electorate. The proportion of House and Senate members who compile moderate legislative voting records has declined over the past three decades. This has been accompanied by a widening of the ideological gap between the Republican and Democratic congressional delegations (see, e.g., Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; McCarty et al., 2006). Elite level polarization, which encompasses long-term policy debates on social welfare issues along with cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage, has inspired extensive research examining whether the American public has polarized alongside political elites, and also whether specific subgroups of voters have responded disproportionately to elite polarization (see, e.g., Hetherington, 2001; Fiorina et al., 2004; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Layman et al., 2006; Jacobson, 2007; Levendusky, 2009). These studies report consistent evidence of growing mass-level

polarization, in particular, that the policy preferences of Democratic and Republican partisans have diverged over the past thirty years. There is also evidence that affluent, informed, and politically engaged citizens have polarized to a much greater extent than other subgroups in the electorate (see, e.g., Claassen and Highton, 2008; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Layman et al., 2006). The most engaged American citizens perceive party elite polarization, and the most engaged citizens exhibit the greatest degree of polarization.

In contrast to the growing elite polarization in the United States, British politics over the past twenty years has witnessed dramatic depolarization between Labour and Conservative party elites on economic and social welfare policy. An emerging literature documents depolarization in British citizens' partisan loyalties (Heath, 1991; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; Clarke et al., 2009), and in the policy beliefs and partisan ideological differences of the British mass public (Green, 2007; Adams et al., forthcoming). These studies suggest that mass-level depolarization in Britain may be the mirror image of mass polarization in the United States. To date, however, there is no scholarly research analyzing whether mass-level depolarization extends across different subgroups in the British electorate,

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or whether, alternatively, mass depolarization is confined primarily to an “upper stratum” of educated, affluent, and politically engaged citizens.¹ If mass polarization and depolarization are, in fact, reciprocal processes, then we might expect depolarization in the British electorate to resemble mass-level polarization in the U.S., i.e., that more knowledgeable, affluent, and educated British citizens will exhibit by far the largest changes in their policy positions and partisan loyalties. The British case is particularly instructive because it mirrors research in other European countries documenting elite and partisan depolarization, particularly with regard to weakening partisan ties (Berglund et al., 2005; Dalton, 2004; 2008; Schmitt, 2009). We therefore address the following questions: have subgroups of British voters – defined in terms of education, income, and political engagement – differed significantly in their perceptions of party elite depolarization during the post-Thatcher era, and, have these subgroups differed significantly in the degree to which they have depolarized across this period? We also ask: Do the answers to these questions depend on how we conceptualize mass-level depolarization?

We report longitudinal analyses of British Election Study survey data over the period 1987–2001 and find significant perceptions of elite depolarization among the subgroups that we analyze, along with significant declines in partisan-based polarization at the individual level, a finding we label *electorate-wide depolarization*.² However, while we observe that all of the subgroups that we analyze – the affluent and the less affluent, the highly educated and the less educated, and the most and least politically engaged – perceived substantial elite policy depolarization between 1987 and 2001, and also depolarized themselves across this period, we find that these tendencies were (modestly) more pronounced among the most affluent, educated, and politically engaged citizens. We emphasize, however, that the subgroup-based differences we identify are differences in degree, not in kind. Our central finding is that all of the voter subgroups we analyze reacted significantly to the dramatic elite-level policy depolarization that has occurred during the post-Thatcher period in British politics.

We believe there are two plausible explanations for why we observe *electorate-wide depolarization* in Britain, rather than the clear subgroup-based differences documented in the United States. First, the parliamentary delegations of the Labour and Conservative parties are considerably more unified than their American counterparts, so that British parties provide citizens with clearer policy cues than the

more ideologically diverse, decentralized parties in the United States.³ Second, despite the fact that the cumulative degree of partisan polarization in the U.S. congress has been dramatic – arguably as dramatic as the degree of Labour-Conservative elite depolarization in Britain – American elite polarization has been a more gradual process, one that has unfolded over roughly thirty years (see, e.g., Hetherington, 2001; McCarty et al., 2006; Levendusky, 2009). It seems plausible that, ceteris paribus, the challenge of perceiving and reacting to American elites’ more gradual policy polarization has placed greater demands on citizens’ political capacities than the challenge of perceiving the faster-paced policy shifts that British elites have pursued during the post-Thatcher era. While citizens’ education and political knowledge plausibly mediate their abilities to assess and react to “difficult” or confusing political scenarios, citizens’ political capacities may be less relevant to their interpretations of “easy” scenarios, where the relevant political signals are clear-cut. Put differently, British party elites convey clear policy cues that should register even with citizens who possess limited information about politics and who have modest income or educational backgrounds.

We believe our findings are significant for three reasons. First, they have an important implication for political parties’ election strategies: namely, that in forecasting the electoral effects of major policy shifts, British party elites should project that citizens from all walks of life will perceive and react to these shifts. Our study, which is to our knowledge the first to analyze subgroup-based perceptions of (de)polarization outside the United States, and subgroup depolarization, may provide a springboard for more general comparative analyses of how the political system, and parties’ organizational characteristics, mediate mass-elite policy linkages (see, e.g., Kitschelt, 2009; Stevenson and Vonnahme, 2009; Soroka and Wlezién, 2010).

Second, and related, our findings suggest that British party elites have electoral incentives to provide more equal representation of different subgroups’ policy preferences than is the case in the United States. American politics scholars report evidence that elected officials respond disproportionately to the policy preferences of affluent, educated, and politically involved citizens, at the expense of other segments of the electorate (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2005; Griffin and Newman, 2005). This pattern of *unequal representation* by American politicians plausibly stems in part from their perceptions that the members of these privileged subgroups respond disproportionately to elites’ policy behavior, i.e., American elites are motivated to cater on policy grounds to the affluent and educated subgroups that are most likely to reward such policy appeals. By contrast, the roughly equal reactions to party policy shifts that we observe across different British subgroups may motivate British elites to provide more

¹ However, below we discuss research by Andersen et al. (2002) that bears on this issue.

² We focus on the period from 1987 onwards because this is the time period for which we have comparable measures of citizens’ policy preferences. The pre-1987 versions of the BES policy scales have different end-points and (in some cases) dramatically different question wordings, so that they are not comparable to the 1987–2001 policy scale questions. The 2005 BES cross-sectional study did not include these policy scale questions, which is why we restrict our attention to the 1987–2001 period. For 2001 we rely on the 2nd wave of the 1997–2001 panel study, which contained policy scale questions comparable with those included in the 1987, 1992, and 1997 BES cross-sections.

³ In this regard, there is extensive research documenting that citizens in European democracies – all of which feature significantly greater degrees of party-line voting in parliament than is observed in the U.S. congress – have more accurate perceptions of parties’ policy positions than do American voters (see, e.g., Pierce, 1998).

equal representation of different subgroups' collective policy preferences.⁴ To the extent this is the case, the electorate-wide depolarization that we observe in Britain is normatively desirable.

Third, our analyses document the dramatic shift away from the policy-based British electoral politics of the Thatcher era – a time period when voters' party loyalties were strongly related to their policy preferences and subgroup characteristics – to the 2000s, in which voters (and elites) deemphasized debates over positional issues. Clarke et al. (2004, 2009) document that the British general elections of 2001 and 2005 turned primarily on citizens' performance-based "valence" considerations relating to parties' abilities to manage the economy, to effectively address security issues such as crime and terrorism, and to deliver public services. Our analyses illuminate the evolution of British politics away from the spatial and cleavage-based party competition of the Thatcher era, towards the era of performance-based politics in recent British elections.

2.0. U.S. research and implications for mass depolarization

American politics scholars have explored the extent to which elite polarization has been mirrored in the mass public. Several studies address this issue by proposing that mass-level polarization should develop disproportionately among educated and informed citizens (e.g., see Hetherington, 2001; Fiorina et al., 2008; Layman et al., 2006; Jacobson, 2007; Claassen and Highton, 2008; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). The rationale behind these claims is that politically informed, educated, and engaged citizens are the most likely to perceive the emerging policy polarization between Republican and Democrat party elites and therefore to exhibit the strongest reactions. Thus, Hetherington (2001) demonstrates that educated and affluent American citizens have perceived elite polarization to a greater extent than have other citizens, while Carsey and Layman (2006) identify significant individual-level reactions to elite polarization among the stratum of citizens who accurately perceive these elite-level policy differences, but find no effects among voters who fail to perceive these differences. Similarly, Baldassarri and Gelman (2008; see also Claassen and Highton, 2008) find that over the past thirty years the degree of partisan sorting in the American electorate, i.e., the correlation between citizens' policy beliefs and their party identification, has increased disproportionately among affluent and politically engaged citizens. To date, however, these findings have been confined to the U.S. case, in which the mass public confronts policy polarization between two relatively decentralized and heterogeneous parties. We explore the degree to which U.S. findings of electoral

subgroup differences extend to the British case, where the public confronts convergence between more unified and centralized parties.

2.1. Elite-level depolarization in Britain

The phenomenon of elite depolarization in Britain began with Margaret Thatcher's replacement by John Major in 1990 as Conservative Party leader (and Prime Minister). It continued with "New Labour's" dramatic policy moderation under Tony Blair, and the more gradual move towards the centre of the British Conservatives (Green, 2011). The Labour and Conservative party elites entered a period in the 2000s where policy disputes relating to issues such as taxation, income redistribution, nationalization of industry, and social services were far more muted than during the Thatcher era. These trends are apparent in over-time analyses of the policy statements in the Labour and Conservative parties' election manifestos. The Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) reports Left–Right coding of these election manifestos during the post-war period for Britain (see Budge et al., 2001; Bara, 2006), suggesting that the parties presented convergent ideologies during much of the 1950s and 1960s, the period of "Social Democratic Consensus" (see Norton, 1998), but that they polarized during the latter half of the 1970s and into the 1980s, when the Conservatives shifted to the right under Margaret Thatcher's leadership and Labour shifted to the left under the leadership of Michael Foot. The CMP codings register the parties' dramatic depolarization during the post-Thatcher era, when "New Labour" under Tony Blair sharply moderated its social welfare policies, and the Conservatives shifted towards the centre.

This post-Thatcher period of elite policy depolarization is also apparent in expert survey party placement data (see Laver, 1998; Benoit and Laver, 2006) and in survey respondents' perceptions of the parties' policy positions (see, e.g., Green, 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Milazzo et al., 2012; Adams et al., forthcoming). This electoral-level perception of elite depolarization is clearly revealed using a survey measure from the British Election Study (BES) tapping the perception that there is 'a great difference' between the two main British parties. The proportion of BES respondents perceiving significant differences between the Conservative and Labour parties shot up during the period of elite polarization in the late 1970s and 1980s, from below 40% in 1974 to nearly 90% in 1987, but this proportion plummeted to only 25% by 2005.⁵

3. Which groups perceived elite depolarization?

The evidence of elite policy depolarization, and the perceptions of this depolarization by BES survey respondents, prompts the following question: Have perceptions of elite depolarization during the post-Thatcher period been

⁴ Of course, party policy appeals to affluent and well-educated voters may confer ancillary benefits. Members of these groups may disproportionately reward the party with financial contributions and/or with participation in other campaign activities (see, e.g., Brady et al., 2009). Our point here is that, in comparative terms, we should expect that electorates displaying more equal responsiveness across subgroups will receive more equal representation from political elites.

⁵ The wording of the question was: "Considering everything the Conservative and Labour parties stand for, would you say there is a great difference between them, some difference between them, or, not much difference between them?"

confined primarily to the stratum of educated, affluent, and/or politically engaged citizens?

3.1. Data and methodology: perceived party differences

We estimate an OLS model using pooled data from the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001 British Election Studies, examining the effect of respondents' income, education level, and newspaper readership on their perceptions of differences between the Labour and Conservative parties' positions on four policy issues pertaining to the left–right dimension in British politics.

The party position policy scales relate to respondents' placements of the parties with respect to: providing social services versus cutting taxes; support for income redistribution; fighting inflation versus lowering unemployment; and, support for nationalization of industry.⁶ Each policy scale runs from 1 to 11, with higher values denoting a more right-wing position (Appendix A presents the texts of the policy scale questions). The dependent variable, *Perceived Party Differences*, is the absolute distance between the respondent's placement of the Labour and Conservative parties averaged across the four policy scales.⁷ We note that the mean difference between BES respondents' placements of the Conservative and Labour parties on these scales declined from 5.2 units in 1987 to 2.7 units in 2001.

We use income, education, and newspaper readership as the three best available measures of affluence, education, and political engagement, which are available across the four relevant British Election Studies between 1987 and 2001. Because the number of categories included for the income variable vary by survey, *Income* is coded 1 if respondents fall above the median reported income in the survey and 0 if they fall below the median in the focal BES study. *Education* is coded 1 for respondents who completed a college/university degree, and 0 for all others, and *Newspaper Reader* is coded 1 if respondents report reading a daily newspaper, and 0 otherwise. To capture the effect of the over-time depolarization between parties, we include dummy variables for elections in the 1987–2001 period. Note that the dummy variable representing the 1987

election has been omitted and is, therefore, the reference category.⁸

Because we are interested in the extent to which subgroup characteristic effects decline with time, we interact each election dummy with *Income*, *Education* and *Newspaper Readership*. In the following model, we expect the effects for each election dummy to be significant and negative, as BES respondents' perceptions of party differences decline in each year, relative to the 1987 base category. The coefficient estimates on the *Education*, *Income*, and *Newspaper Readership* variables denote the direct effects of these respondent characteristics on perceptions of party differences in 1987. If the affluent, the educated, and newspaper readers perceived greater policy distance between the parties overall, the coefficients associated with the main effects will be positive. The coefficient estimates associated with the interaction terms denote whether the effects of these characteristics change as the parties depolarize across the 1987–2001 time period. We expect the interactions to be negative and significant for each year in which there is a significant decline in the effect of respondent *Education*, *Income*, or *Newspaper Readership*, relative to the 1987 base category.

3.2. Results: perceived party differences

Table 1 presents two models. The first is a baseline model of the effects for each election dummy, the control variables, and the direct effects for *Education*, *Income* and *Newspaper Readership* (without interactions). We then present a model of “best fit,” which includes the interactions that improve model fit with respect to the baseline model and which results in the lowest AIC statistic (reported in the appendix, Table B1). It includes the interactions between the election dummies and *Education*, *Income*, and *Newspaper Readership*, where the addition of the subgroup interaction terms improve upon model fit, as indicated by significant *F*-tests.⁹

With the exception of 1992 in the “best fit” model, the coefficients on the election dummies indicate respondents did, in fact, perceive the over-time depolarization between the parties. Respondents perceived significant declines in party differences between 1987 and 1997, and again between 1987 and 2001, but the decline in perceived party differences was not significant between 1987 and 1992 when the interaction terms are included. In both models, the direct effects for *Income*, *Education* and *Newspaper Readership* are positive and significant, suggesting that respondents with higher incomes, those with a university/

⁶ We note that the policy scales may differ in the extent to which they tap salient dimensions in British politics over time. For example, the nationalization scale presents a choice between nationalizing ‘more or less’ industries, so that as more industries were privatized under Thatcher (and then John Major) respondents likely changed their reference point in answering this question. Furthermore, there is evidence that the salience of the nationalization issue declined over time (see Heath et al., 2001). However analyses that omit the nationalization scale (and thus rely on the three additional policy scales described above) support substantive conclusions that are identical to those we report below.

⁷ We estimated a similar model where the dependent variable is the difference between the respondent's placement of the Labour and Conservative parties averaged across the four policy scales (rather than the absolute difference). The findings remained unchanged.

⁸ Control variables for age (numeric) and gender are also included. We do not include respondent social class in the model, since we specifically analyze respondent income, but estimates including social class as an additional control variable support substantive conclusions that are similar to those we report below.

⁹ To determine the model of best fit, we estimated the baseline model, and then evaluated the addition of each interaction term by comparing the new model to the baseline model using the *F*-test. The final model, reported here, includes the combination of interactions that provides the best fit overall. The *F*-statistic associated with the difference between the best fit and baseline models (18.55) is significant at $p < 0.01$. In addition, we estimated a full model, including all the interaction terms, and evaluated the effect of the deletion of each interaction term. Finally, we also evaluated the model fit after adding each group of interactions (i.e., the *Income* interactions, the *Education* interactions, the *Newspaper Readership*).

Table 1
Perceived Distance between Parties, 1987–2001.

	Baseline model		Best fit model	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
1992	−0.51**	(0.08)	0.18**	(0.16)
1997	−1.37**	(0.06)	−0.81**	(0.11)
2001	−2.71**	(0.06)	−1.86**	(0.12)
Income	0.22**	(0.05)	0.28**	(0.06)
Income*2001			−0.32**	(0.11)
Education	0.91**	(0.07)	1.37**	(0.10)
Education*1997			−1.05**	(0.16)
Education*2001			−0.64**	(0.16)
Paper reader	0.48**	(0.05)	1.03**	(0.10)
Paper reader*1992			−0.99**	(0.19)
Paper reader*1997			−0.65**	(0.14)
Paper reader*2001			−0.95**	(0.13)
Age	0.01**	(0.00)	−0.38**	(0.05)
Gender	−0.38**	(0.05)	0.01**	(0.00)
Constant	4.66**	(0.10)	4.19**	(0.12)
R ²	0.17		0.18	
N	9817		9817	

Notes. Robust standard errors given in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. The parameter estimates reported above were computed on pooled data from the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001 British Election Studies. The dependent variable was the BES respondent's perception of the policy distance between the Labour and Conservative parties, averaged across four 1–11 policy scales pertaining to income redistribution, nationalization of industry, tradeoffs between inflation and unemployment, and tradeoffs between taxes and spending on social services (the Appendix presents the texts of these questions).

college degree, and newspaper readers were more likely to perceive greater differences between the parties, on average. As expected, we find significant and negative effects for each of our subgroup characteristics interacted with the election dummies. In each case, the reported coefficients are negative in direction, denoting that in these years there was a statistically significant decline in the effect of the subgroup characteristics on the perception of the differences between the two main parties. The “best fit” model reveals that these declines were significant between 1987 and 2001 among those from higher and lower incomes, between 1987 and 1997, and 1987 and 2001 for those from higher and lower educational attainment levels, and in each of the election years for those reading a newspaper, and otherwise.

Fig. 1 (a)–(c) displays the predicted values of perceived party differences by income (a), education (b) and by newspaper readership (c) for the election years in which the difference between subgroups was statistically significant. These figures support two conclusions: First, all subgroups of respondents – the affluent and less affluent, the college-educated and the less-educated, and those who read a daily newspaper and those who did not – perceived the dramatic depolarization between the Conservative and Labour party elites that occurred between 1987 and 2001; for all groups, there is a decline in the perception of distance between the Conservative and Labour parties between 1987 and 2001. Second, college-educated, and newspaper-reading respondents perceived modestly greater degrees of party polarization (on average) at the beginning of the 1987–2001 period, but by 2001 the BES respondents with these characteristics perceived degrees of party polarization that were

nearly identical (on average) to the perceptions of less educated respondents and respondents who do not read a daily newspaper. This suggests that perceptions of depolarization were somewhat greater for respondents holding a college degree, and for respondents who read a daily newspaper. However, the values illustrated in Fig. 1 show that these differences are very modest. The confidence intervals overlap for respondents from the high and lower income groups in each individual year. The most significant pattern suggested by Fig. 1 relates to the similarities – not the differences – across different subgroups' perceptions of party policy positions: namely, the members of every British electoral subgroup perceived (on average) a considerable degree of Conservative-Labour policy polarization at the time of the 1987 election, and the members of each subgroup perceived that the Conservative and Labour parties depolarized sharply across the 1987–2001 period.

4. Electoral depolarization: voter subgroups in Britain

If citizens react to their evolving perceptions of elite policy polarization, then our finding that different British electoral subgroups perceived roughly comparable degrees of elite depolarization between 1987 and 2001 implies that these subgroups should also display similar reactions to this dramatic Conservative-Labour policy convergence. Such a pattern would stand in contrast to the findings of American politics scholars, that the subgroups of educated and politically engaged citizens have polarized disproportionately during the past 30 years – a period of dramatic American elite polarization – compared to the reactions of other subgroups in the American electorate (see, e.g., Claassen and Highton, 2008; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008).

Note, however, that British subgroups' similar perceptions of elite depolarization during the post-Thatcher period need not necessarily imply that these subgroups also displayed similar reactions to elite depolarization. Suppose, for instance, that politically engaged citizens evaluate parties primarily based on their policy positions, while less-engaged citizens prioritize factors such as national economic conditions and party leaders' personal images (e.g., Andersen et al., 2002). In this case, we might expect politically engaged citizens to adjust their partisan loyalties in response to British elites' policy depolarization to a much greater degree than less-engaged citizens. Similarly, politically knowledgeable, socio-economically advantaged citizens may differ from other citizens in their openness to elite *policy persuasion*, i.e., in their willingness to shift their policy positions in response to their preferred party's policy shifts. These questions are the subject of the following analyses.

4.1. Electoral depolarization: a partisan perspective

Citizens' tendencies to update their partisanship and/or their policy beliefs in response to party elites' policy shifts are the components of the *partisan sorting* phenomenon that American politics scholars emphasize in their studies of mass polarization (see, e.g., Carsey and Layman, 2006;

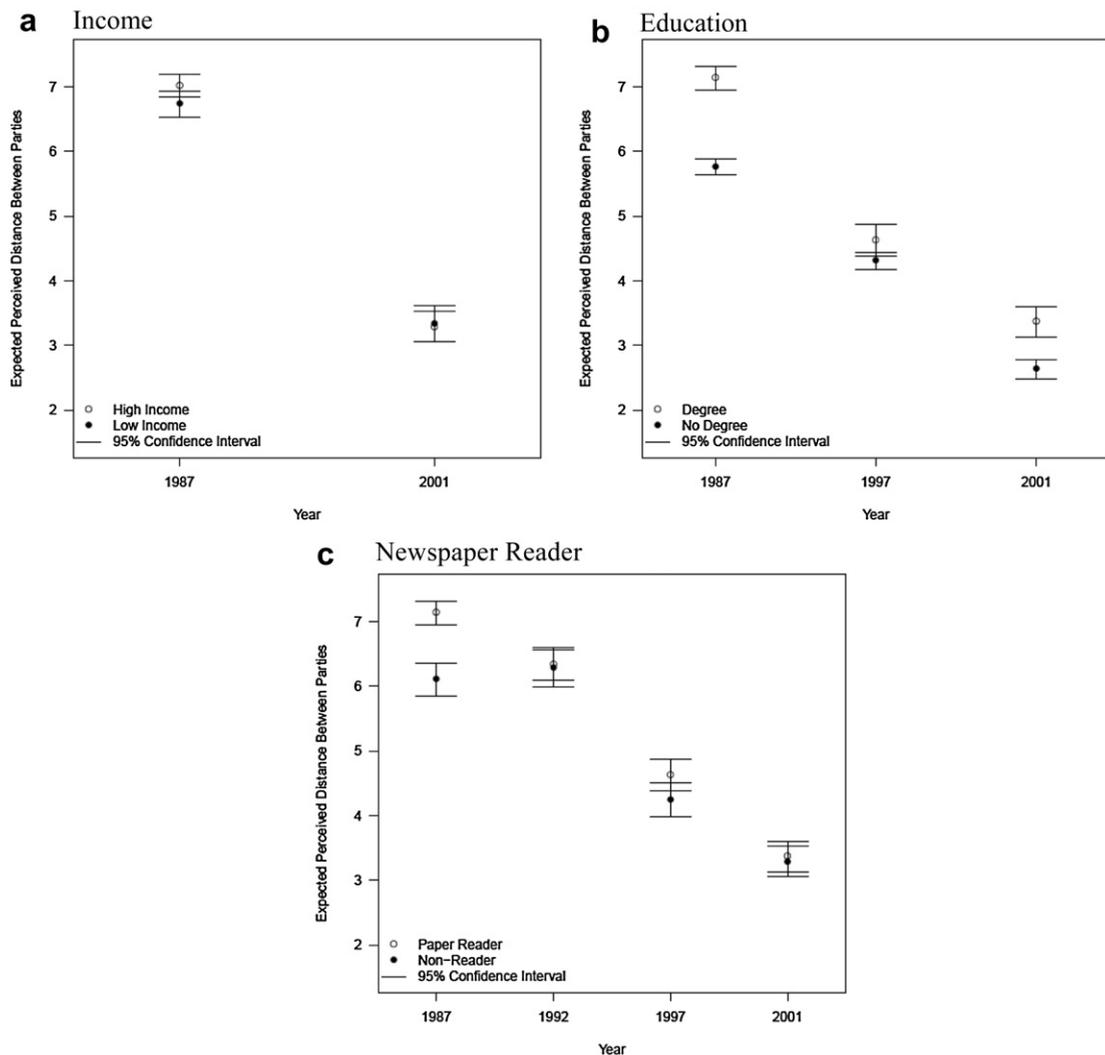


Fig. 1. Predicted perceptions of party differences, by subgroup, by year. Notes. The figures are predicted using the coefficient estimates from the “best fit” model in Table 1 and display the projections of British Election Study respondents’ perceptions of the policy distance between the Conservative and Labour parties. (a) Income, (b) Education, (c) Newspaper Reader.

Levendusky, 2009). According to this perspective, the policy polarization between Democratic and Republican party elites over the past thirty years has prompted a sorting of Democratic and Republican partisans in the electorate, i.e., Republicans partisans have become more conservative over time and Democrat partisans more liberal (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998; Erikson et al., 2002; Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006; Hetherington, 2009). Here, we analyze the question: Does the degree of partisan sorting in the British electorate during the post-Thatcher era differ significantly across subgroups of voters?

4.2. Data and methodology: partisan sorting

To evaluate this question, we first calculate correlation coefficients between respondent left–right attitudes and their comparative evaluations of Labour and the Conservatives. Respondents’ left–right attitudes are

defined as their average self-placements across the four policy scales described above (social services/taxes; income redistribution; inflation versus unemployment; nationalization of industry), and respondents’ comparative party evaluations are defined as the difference between their evaluation of the Conservative Party on a 1–5 like/dislike scale (where 1 = strongly dislike and 5 = strongly like) and their rating of Labour on this scale. Thus the *Lab-Con Feeling Differential* variable runs from -4 (strongly prefers Labour) to $+4$ (strongly prefers the Conservatives). We again subdivide the respondents by income (above and below the median), education (whether or not respondents possessed a college/university degree) and newspaper readership (i.e., daily newspaper readers versus non-readers).

We next extend the computations by presenting an OLS model of the effect of respondents’ left–right policy preferences and subgroup characteristics (income, education and newspaper readership) upon their comparative

evaluations of the Conservative and Labour parties over the 1987–2001 period.¹⁰ The dependent variable, *Lab-Con Feeling Differential*, is again the difference between the respondent's evaluations of the Conservative and the Labour parties, while the respondent's left–right position is defined as his/her mean self-placement averaged across the four BES policy scales described above. We expect that more right-wing respondents will evaluate the Conservative Party more favourably relative to Labour, but we expect the relationship between citizens' left–right attitudes and their comparative party evaluations to weaken over time. To evaluate these expectations, we interact respondents' *Left-Right* positions with each of the election year dummies. We also expect the effect of respondent *Left-Right* position to be positive and significant, but the interactions of *Left-Right* attitudes with each election dummy to be negative in direction, indicating that the effect of left–right attitudes on Labour and Conservative feeling differentials weakens as the parties depolarized (and were perceived to do so) between 1987 and 2001. Finally, we once again estimate interactions between *Income*, *Education*, and *Newspaper Readership* and the election year dummies, alongside the main effects of voter subgroups, in order to evaluate whether respondent subgroup characteristic effects weaken between 1987 and 2001 (and in the intervening election years).

4.3. Results: partisan sorting

Fig. 2(a–c) displays the correlations between respondents' left–right attitudes and their comparative party evaluations, in each election year between 1987 and 2001.

Fig. 2(a)–(c) reveals that all subgroups of BES respondents displayed comparable declines across the 1987–2001 period in their degree of partisan sorting. The figures also show that affluent, educated, and newspaper-reading respondents displayed (modestly) greater degrees of partisan sorting in each election year than did other respondents, i.e., the correlations between respondents' left–right attitudes and their comparative party evaluations were somewhat higher for these subgroups than they were for the less affluent, the less educated, and respondents who report that they do not read the newspaper. This pattern is consistent with our earlier conclusion that affluent, educated, newspaper readers perceived (modestly) greater policy differences between the parties across this period (see Table 1 and Fig. 1(a–c) above). Again however, the most significant pattern in Fig. 2(a)–(c) pertains to the similarities across subgroups: namely, that each of the subgroups we analyzed depolarized across the 1987–2001 period according to the partisan sorting criterion, and, all subgroups depolarized to roughly the same degree.

Table 2 presents two OLS models of the effect of respondents' left–right policy preferences and subgroup characteristics (income, education and newspaper readership) upon their comparative evaluations of the Conservative and Labour parties. As above, we report a baseline

model including the main effects for *Year* dummies, subgroup characteristics *Income*, *Education*, and *Newspaper Readership* and the controls, and then a best fit model, including only those interaction terms that improve the model fit, and the model resulting in the lowest AIC statistic (see Table B2 in the appendix).¹¹ The parameter estimates reported in Table 2 reveal that the estimated coefficient on the *Left Right* variable is positive, significant and substantively large, indicating that citizens' left–right preferences exerted strong effects on their comparative party evaluations in 1987. Furthermore, in both models, the coefficient estimates associated with the interactions between *Left Right* and the election dummy variables are negative and statistically significant, suggesting that the impact of citizens' left–right preferences on their comparative party evaluations declined in each respective year, between 1987 and 2001. Fig. 3, which reports the marginal effects of respondent left–right attitudes for each election year, reveals that the most significant decline in partisan sorting also took place between 1987 and 1997. This decline in partisan sorting is consistent with work reporting a decline in the relationship of left–right attitudes on British vote choices and on partisanship (Sanders, 1999; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Milazzo et al., 2012; Evans and Tilly, 2011).

The “best fit” model in Table 2 further reveals that, in addition to statistically significant declines in partisan sorting, the effects of subgroup characteristics diminish during the period, specifically for citizens from high and low income groups, and for citizens from high and low education groups. The positive coefficient estimate on the *Income* variable, in combination with the negative coefficient estimates on the interactions between *Income* and the dummy variables representing the 1997 and 2001 elections, implies that the effect of income on citizens' comparative party evaluations diminished across the 1987–2001 period.¹² Similarly, the negative effect on the *Education* variable (where higher education respondents were less likely to have positive evaluations of the Conservatives), combined with the positive effect on the [*Education**1997] interaction also implies that the effect of education approaches zero between 1987 and 1997. These effects are significant when controlling for the declining relationship between left–right attitudes and the rating differentials between the two main parties. In contrast, we find no statistically significant effects (which result in superior model fit) for the interactions between the

¹¹ To determine the model of best fit, we used the same procedure outline in footnote 9. The *F*-statistic associated with the difference between the “best fit” and baseline models (26.42) is significant at $p < 0.01$, and the best fit model results in the lowest AIC statistic.

¹² Specifically, the coefficient estimate +0.59 on the *Income* variable in Table 2 implies that affluent BES respondents tended to evaluate the Conservatives more positively (relative to Labour) than did less affluent respondents in 1987, i.e., ceteris paribus, affluent respondents' relative rating of the Conservative Party versus Labour was 0.59 points higher than for less affluent respondents, along the –4 to +4 comparative party evaluation scale. The –0.42 coefficient estimate on the [*Income**1997] variable implies that the Conservatives' rating advantage among affluent respondents (compared to less affluent respondents) declined by [+0.57 – 0.42] = +0.15 units between the 1987 and the 1997 elections; and by [+0.57 – 0.31] = +0.26 units between 1987 and 2001.

¹⁰ Once again, we estimate the model using pooled data from the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001 British Election Studies.

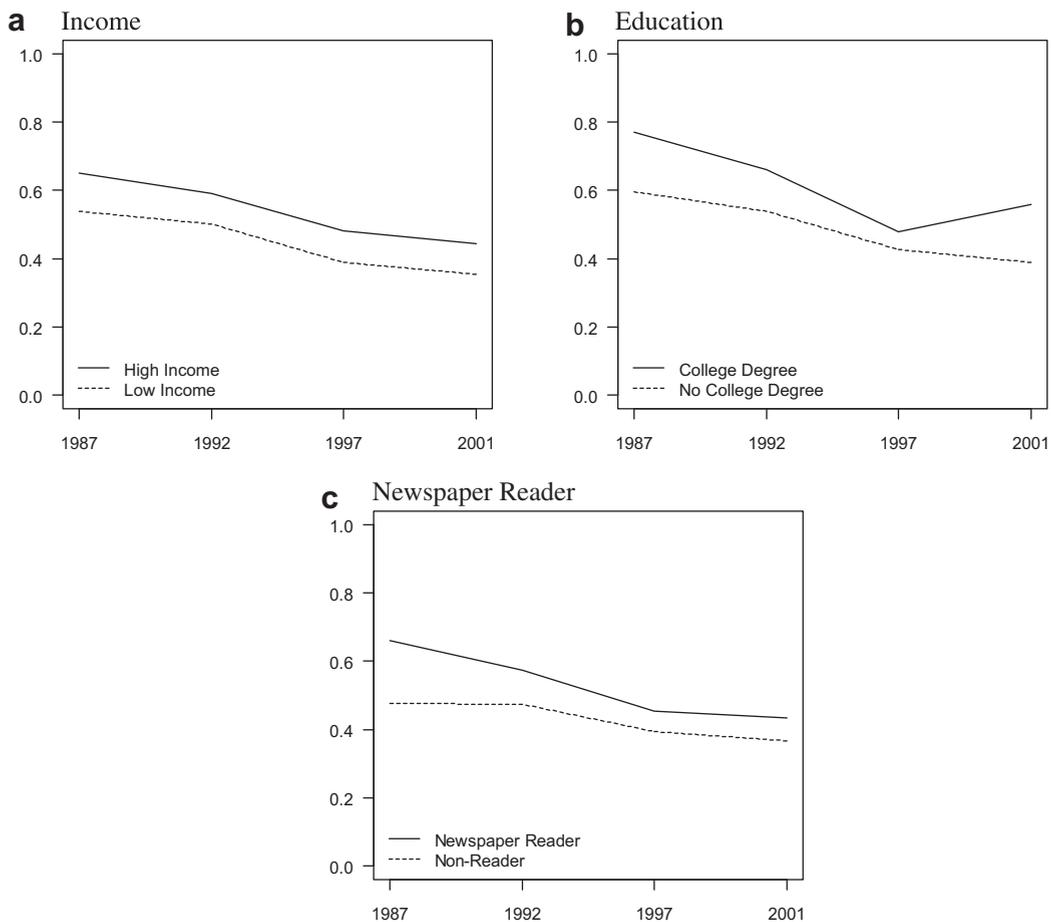


Fig. 2. Correlation between Mean Self-placements on Four BES Policy Scales and Labour-Conservative Feeling Differentials, by Subgroup. The figures display the correlations between British Election Study (BES) respondents' left-right attitudes and their comparative evaluations of the Conservative and Labour parties, computed for the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001 general elections, and subdivided by respondents' level of income (Fig. 2a), education (Fig. 2b), and newspaper readership (Fig. 2c). BES respondents' left-right attitudes are defined as their self-placements averaged across four policy scales pertaining to social services/taxes; income redistribution; inflation versus unemployment; nationalization of industry; respondents' comparative party evaluations are defined as the difference between their rating of the Conservative Party on a 1–4 like/dislike scale (where 0 = strongly dislike and 4 = strongly like) and their rating of Labour on this scale. The survey questions we used to construct these scales are presented in the Appendix. (a) Income, (b) Education, (c) Newspaper Reader.

Newspaper readership and the election dummies. Given that the effect of this characteristic neither declines or increases, it implies that respondents from the two groups depolarized in equal measure, a finding that mirrors the similar declines in partisan depolarization across newspaper readers and those who do not read a daily newspaper, presented in Fig. 2.¹³

¹³ In supplementary analyses, we estimated multivariate OLS models of BES respondents' comparative party evaluations for each of the four elections, to evaluate whether there were changes in the percentage of the variance explained by our model of left-right preferences and subgroup characteristics. We found that there was dramatic decline in the R^2 of the models, from 0.41 in 1987 to 0.18 in 2001, which supports the substantive interpretation we advance above, that as party elites depolarized during the post-Thatcher era, citizens' left-right orientations and their personal characteristics – notably education and income – exerted diminishing effects on their party evaluations. Simply put, in 1987 citizens' left-right attitudes and their personal characteristics (income, education, and newspaper readership) predicted their comparative party evaluations quite well, but by 2001 this was no longer the case.

In toto, the analyses presented in Tables 1 and 2 and Figs. 1–3 suggest that British party elites' policy depolarization was perceived similarly across groups of BES respondents subdivided by income, education, and newspaper readership; that these subgroups also displayed similar degrees of partisan-based depolarization across the 1987–2001 time period; and, that the direct effects of income on citizens' party evaluations also declined across this period.

4.4. Electoral depolarization: a policy-based perspective

Scholars of American politics also emphasize a strictly *policy-based* feature of mass polarization: namely, the diversity of citizens' policy preferences (e.g., DiMaggio et al., 1996; Fiorina et al., 2004). According to this perspective, an over-time decrease in the dispersion of BES respondents' self-placements on the policy scales included

Table 2
Lab-Con feeling differential, 1987–2001.

	Baseline model		Best fit model	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
1992	0.04**	(0.06)	0.39**	(0.14)
1997	-1.08**	(0.05)	0.04**	(0.12)
2001	-0.95**	(0.05)	0.22**	(0.14)
Left/right	0.60**	(0.01)	0.71**	(0.02)
Left/right *1992			-0.07**	(0.03)
Left/right *1997			-0.22**	(0.02)
Left/right *2001			-0.22**	(0.03)
Income	0.39**	(0.06)	0.59**	(0.07)
Income*1997			-0.42**	(0.09)
Income*2001			-0.31**	(0.10)
Education	-0.32**	(0.06)	-0.42**	(0.07)
Education*1997			0.38**	(0.12)
Paper reader	0.03**	(0.04)	0.01**	(0.04)
Gender	0.36**	(0.04)	0.35**	(0.04)
Age	0.01**	(0.00)	0.01**	(0.00)
Constant	-3.34**	(0.16)	-3.91**	(0.16)
Observations	9842		9842	
R-squared	0.35		0.36	

Notes. Robust standard errors given in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. The parameter estimates reported above were computed on pooled data from the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001 British Election Studies. The dependent variable was the difference between the BES respondent's evaluation of the Conservative Party and his/her evaluation of Labour, where each party evaluation was along a 1–5 scale.

in our study would be evidence of policy-based depolarization.

Table 3, which reports the standard deviations of BES respondents' self-placements on the four policy scales used above, presents evidence on policy-based depolarization for British subgroups defined in terms of income, education, and newspaper readership. For

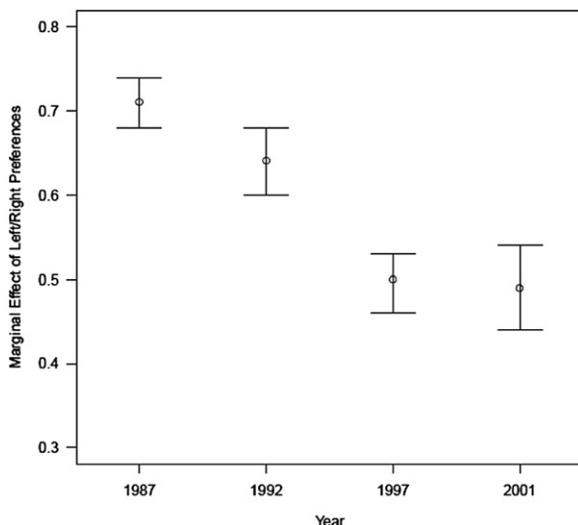


Fig. 3. Marginal Effect of Left/Right Positions on Lab-Con Feeling Differential. Notes. The figure is created using predictions from the “best fit” Model in Table 2 and displays the marginal effects of left–right policy positions on the differential between the Conservative and Labour party feeling differential ratings for the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001 elections.

high- and low-income respondents, Table 3 reports the standard deviations of the respondents' self-placements on each policy scale for each election year, while the right hand side column reports the change in these standard deviations between 1987 and 2001. We also report, for all subgroups, the mean standard deviation computed across the four policy scales, which provides a composite index of the degree of policy-based polarization for each group.

The results in Table 3 show, for each subgroup, that the standard deviations of BES respondents' self-placements declined over time, i.e., every subgroup displays evidence of policy-based depolarization between 1987 and 2001. The mean standard deviation of high-income respondents' self-placements across the four 1–11 policy scales dropped from 2.83 units in 1987 to 2.48 units in 2001, a decline of 0.35 units, while for low-income respondents this mean standard deviation dropped from 3.10 units in 1987 to 2.71 units in 2001, a 0.39-unit decline. We observe comparable over-time declines in the standard deviations in BES respondents' self-placements on the policy scales among the subgroups of more- and less-educated citizens, and also among newspaper readers along with those that did not read a daily newspaper.¹⁴ These policy-based analyses on mass depolarization thereby support the same conclusion as the partisan-based analyses reported above: namely, we find evidence of electorate-wide depolarization in Britain across the 1987–2001 period, and we also find that the magnitude of the aggregate-level depolarization we observe is similar across all of the subgroups that we examine.

5. Supplementary analyses

We performed supplementary analyses that we report on our web site. The first set of analyses address voter subgroup trends for an alternative perspective on policy-based depolarization that pertains to the connections between citizens' positions across different policy issues, i.e., to what Converse (1964) labelled *attitude constraint* (see also Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). These analyses show that all of the subgroups in our study displayed stable levels of attitude constraint between 1987 and 2001, a pattern that continues to support the substantive conclusion that all of the subgroups in our study displayed similar policy-based reactions to elite depolarization (in this case, that the degree of attitude constraint across different subconstituencies was largely unaffected by elite policy convergence).

¹⁴ Note, however, that the over-time declines in the standard deviations that we observe are relatively modest, suggesting that the magnitude of the mass-level policy-based depolarization in Britain between 1987 and 2001 was smaller than the magnitude of partisan-based depolarization across this period. This conclusion is consistent with the individual-level analyses we report elsewhere (Milazzo et al., 2012), which suggest that British citizens during the post-Thatcher period displayed stronger tendencies to update their party attachments to match their Left–Right policy preferences – a partisan updating phenomenon – compared to their reciprocal tendencies to take policy cues from British political elites on Left–Right issues.

Table 3

Standard deviations of BES respondents' self-placements on the policy scales, 1987–2001.

Subgroup	Policy scale	1987	1992	1997	2001	Change 87–01
High income	Redistribution	3.30	3.25	3.18	2.96	–0.34
	Nationalization	2.90	2.81	2.64	2.38	–0.52
	Inflation/unemployment	2.80	2.71	2.61	2.49	–0.31
	Social services	2.32	2.42	2.23	2.09	–0.23
	Mean on 4 scales	2.83	2.80	2.67	2.48	–0.35
Low income	Redistribution	3.17	3.00	2.67	2.76	–0.41
	Nationalization	3.23	3.17	3.05	2.90	–0.33
	Inflation/unemployment	3.22	3.17	3.03	2.96	–0.26
	Social services	2.79	2.74	2.37	2.20	–0.59
	Mean on 4 scales	3.10	3.02	2.78	2.71	–0.39
College degree	Mean on 4 scales	2.62	2.60	2.48	2.41	–0.21
No college degree	Mean on 4 scales	2.99	2.97	2.78	2.62	–0.37
Newspaper reader	Mean on 4 scales	2.94	2.97	2.80	2.64	–0.30
Non-reader	Mean on 4 scales	2.97	2.89	2.68	2.51	–0.46

Notes. The numbers reported in the table are the standard deviations of the British Election Study respondents' self-placements along the policy 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 reports the difference in the standard deviation of respondents' self-placements in 2001 compared to 1987.

Second, we analyzed the implications for our substantive conclusions of possible errors in our measures of BES respondents' policy preferences. Because it seemed plausible to us that the survey responses of less-educated, politically disengaged citizens exhibited greater measurement error than did the responses of highly educated and well-informed citizens, we re-estimated our analyses of partisan-based depolarization using several alternative assumptions about the reliability of our measures, including analyses that specified significantly less measurement error for affluent, educated, and politically engaged respondents than for other types of respondents. These analyses continued to support our substantive conclusion, that all of the subconstituencies in our study displayed similar policy-based and partisan-based responses to elite depolarization.

Third, we analyzed the implications for our substantive conclusions of *partisan dealignment* trends in the British electorate – whereby the incidence and strength of citizens' partisan attachments have declined over time – that extend over the past several decades (see Clarke et al., 2009; Clarke and Stewart, 1998). This partisan dealignment, which is part of a wider trend of weakening partisan ties in most western European democracies (see, e.g., Dalton, 2004; 2008), represents a possible alternative explanation for the mass-level depolarization that we document in Britain: namely, given that partisans typically have clearer perceptions of party positions than do non-partisans, and are also more likely to hold non-centrist policy viewpoints, we might expect a less partisan British electorate to display less polarized policy attitudes, independently of effects relating to the policy convergence of British elites during the 1987–2001 period. We therefore replicated our multivariate analyses controlling for strength of party identification, and our results continued to support our substantive conclusions.

6. Conclusions

We conclude that during the 1987–2001 period, all segments of the British public – the affluent and the less

affluent; the college-educated and the less-educated; daily newspaper readers and non-readers – perceived the dramatic depolarization of the policy positions proposed by Labour and the Conservative party elites. In contrast to findings on the American mass public, we conclude that British citizens' perceptions of this elite policy depolarization were not confined primarily to the subconstituencies of affluent, educated, or politically engaged citizens. Instead, the members of all British voter subgroups perceived similar degrees of elite left–right depolarization across the post-Thatcher period.

We also identify parallel patterns of *electorate-wide* depolarization over the same period of British politics. We identify declines in the degree of *partisan sorting* in the British electorate – i.e., the relationship between citizens' left–right attitudes and their party attachments – that extend across all the subgroups we examine. This pattern stands in contrast to the findings of American politics scholars, that mass-level polarization in the United States has occurred primarily among the stratum of the most educated and politically engaged citizens (Claassen and Highton, 2008; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Layman et al., 2006). Finally, we identify electorate-wide patterns of *policy-based depolarization* in Britain, whereby the dispersion of BES respondents' self-placements on the policy scales pertaining to longstanding left–right policy debates (over income redistribution, social services, nationalization of industry, and tradeoffs between unemployment versus inflation) has declined over time – and to roughly the same degree – among every subgroup included in our study.

Our analyses do reveal modest subgroup differences in perceived party polarization between 1987 and 2001, in that more affluent, educated, and politically engaged citizens tended to perceive (modestly) greater elite policy differences at the start of this time period, and that these subgroups also displayed modestly stronger degrees of partisan sorting across this time period (defined in terms of the relationship between their left–right attitudes and their party evaluations). However, we do not identify substantively meaningful subgroup differences with respect to

over-time changes in citizens' perceptions of elite polarization, in the degree of partisan sorting, or in policy-based depolarization across the 1987–2001 period: all of the different subgroups that we analyzed perceived the dramatic post-Thatcher depolarization between Labour and Conservative party elites, and all of these voter subgroups themselves depolarized across this period (and to roughly the same degree) according to both policy- and partisan-based criteria. Overall, we believe that the modest subgroup-based differences that we identify are less important than the striking similarities.

It is plausible that the contrasts in mass political behavior between Britain and the United States that we identify reflect organizational and institutional differences: namely, British political parties provide clearer policy cues to their citizens because they are more centralized and feature more unified parliamentary delegations. According to this argument, British party elites provided clear policy cues during the post-Thatcher era that prompted significant partisan- and policy-based reactions among all segments of the British electorate, while the more diffuse policy cues provided by the decentralized and heterogeneous American parties have been received disproportionately by educated, affluent, and politically engaged citizens.¹⁵ British politics now enters a new political climate, in which the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties have entered coalition and the Labour party in opposition may yet define its position in greater contrast to its rivals. If this more complex political environment clouds British citizens' perceptions of party policy differences, then policy- and partisan-based change in the British public may eventually reflect a pattern that parallels the American public, whereby the subgroups of educated and politically engaged citizens respond disproportionately to elite-level policy shifts.

Before we consider possible implications of our findings, we note several caveats. First, the fact that we identify similar depolarization trends across different British subgroups of voters need not imply that the same processes obtain across different subgroups. It is possible, for instance, that in some subgroups the partisan sorting patterns we identify occur because subgroup members shift their partisan allegiances, while for other subgroups these sorting patterns reflect shifts in group members' policy preferences. Second, our analyses apply to debates over economic and social policies, which may be “easy” issues for British citizens in that they involve familiar, long-running policy debates. It is an open question whether our conclusions extend to emerging political issues such as immigration, the environment, and the European Union. We cannot analyze long-term trends in British citizens' preferences on these latter dimensions

because we lack comparable policy scales across a sufficient number of British Election Studies. Finally, we focus on British citizens' reactions to elite depolarization, but do not analyze the strategic calculations by political elites that motivated the Labour-Conservative policy convergence in the first place (on this latter point see Nagel and Wlezien, 2010).

The above caveats notwithstanding, we believe our conclusions have important implications for parties' election strategies, for political representation, and for our comparative understanding of mass-level polarization and depolarization. With respect to parties' election strategies, our findings suggest that in forecasting the electoral effects of major policy shifts, British party elites should project that the subgroups of less-educated, less-affluent, and less politically engaged citizens may react to the same extent as do other subgroups in the electorate – a conclusion we label the *equal reactions result*. This is important because the policy preferences of the less wealthy and the less-educated at times differ substantially from the policy preferences of affluent, highly educated citizens.¹⁶ Our findings suggest that in these situations, political parties cannot cater to the policy beliefs of socio-economically advantaged voter subgroups without sacrificing significant support from less-advantaged subgroups.

With respect to political representation, the equal reactions result is important because it seems normatively desirable that citizens from different strata of society should display similar tendencies to perceive and react to parties' policy shifts. In this regard, our equal reactions finding ties in with important research by Soroka and Wlezien (2010), who present cross-national evidence from Canada, the U.S., and Britain that the policy preferences of different socioeconomic groups tend to shift in the same direction over time. Our findings, in combination with those of Soroka and Wlezien, thereby suggest that different British electoral subgroups tend to shift their policy preferences in similar directions over time, and that these different subgroups also display similar reactions to elites' policy shifts. While these parallel patterns in Britain by no means guarantee that all citizens will receive equal representation from party elites, we believe these patterns are likely to enhance representational equality. In this regard, American politics scholars' finding that U.S. representatives provide dramatically *unequal representation*, i.e., that they respond disproportionately to the policy preferences of affluent and educated citizens (see Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2005; Griffin and Newman, 2005), plausibly stems in part from the fact that the members of these American subgroups react most strongly to elite policy behavior. These contrasting patterns for American and British subgroups suggest that our findings have comparative implications for mass-elite policy linkages.

¹⁵ We note that as American party elites have polarized over the past thirty years, the voting patterns among each party's congressional delegation have become more unified (see, e.g., McCarty et al., 2006). To the extent that this greater elite unity provides clearer policy signals to rank-and-file voters, it is possible that the subconstituency-based differences in American citizens' reactions to elite polarization will diminish over time. However we are unaware of any extant research that evaluates this hypothesis. We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

¹⁶ For instance, the mean self-placement of high-income BES respondents (i.e., those in the top 25%) on the 1–11 income redistribution scale was more than two units to the right of the mean self-placements of low-income respondents (those in the bottom 25%), in both 1987 and 2001.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2012.07.008>.

Appendix A. Wording of BES policy scales and thermometer questions

Equalization 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 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: 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.

Appendix B. Goodness of fit tests for model specifications

Table B1
AIC Comparison (Table 1).

Models	Perceptions of party differences
Baseline	45,381.02
Income only	45,365.50
Education only	45,343.22
Paper reader only	45,319.74
Income, education	45,366.07
Income, paper reader	45,306.93
Education, paper reader	45,288.66
All interactions	45,282.53
"Best fit"	45,282.16

Notes. Table B1 presents the AIC statistics for the models presented in Table 1 (highlighted in bold), as well as those for other possible combinations of groups of interactions.

Table B2
AIC Comparison (Table 2).

Models	Lab/Con thermometer differential
Baseline	40,241.89
Left/right only	40,121.37
Income only	40,198.32
Education only	40,244.50
Paper reader only	40,242.56
Left/right, income	40,102.66
Left/right, education	40,120.75
Left/right, paper reader	40,121.97
Income, education	40,196.16
Income, paper reader	40,201.11
Education, paper reader	40,244.95
Left/right, income, education	40,098.46
Left/right, income, paper reader	40,105.50
Left/right, education, paper reader	40,121.93
Income, education, paper reader	40,198.57
All interactions	40,100.91
"Best fit"	40,096.36

Notes. Table B2 presents the AIC statistics for the models presented in Table 2 (highlighted in bold), as well as those for other possible combinations of groups of interactions.

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