

Structural Incentives for Political Party Polarization

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Background information

Political parties and their voter bases are not mirror opposites of one another. The voting blocks that make up each major party are unique.

Democrats prefer to compromise more so than Republicans.

Research Question

Do Republicans have narrow issue areas but many voters concerned with each issue? Do Democrats have a wide set of issue areas voter base but fewer voters behind each issue?

Does issue density influence whether a political party can compromise on legislation?

Data and Methodology

Table 1 shows preferences between compromising with the other party and sticking to core values between Republicans, Democrats and Independents. The data used was collected from the Pew Research Center. The survey was conducted on March 25-29, 2015 Based on registered voters.

The Party Platform Issue Diversity graph uses data collected by the Comparative Agendas Project. A higher issue diversity score corresponds with a party platform that spends roughly equal proportions of attention on all major topic areas while a low score corresponds with a party platform that spends disproportion amounts of attention on one or more topic areas.

The Normalized Shannon's H diversity index was used to calculate how diverse Republican and Democrat party platforms were from 1948 through 2016.

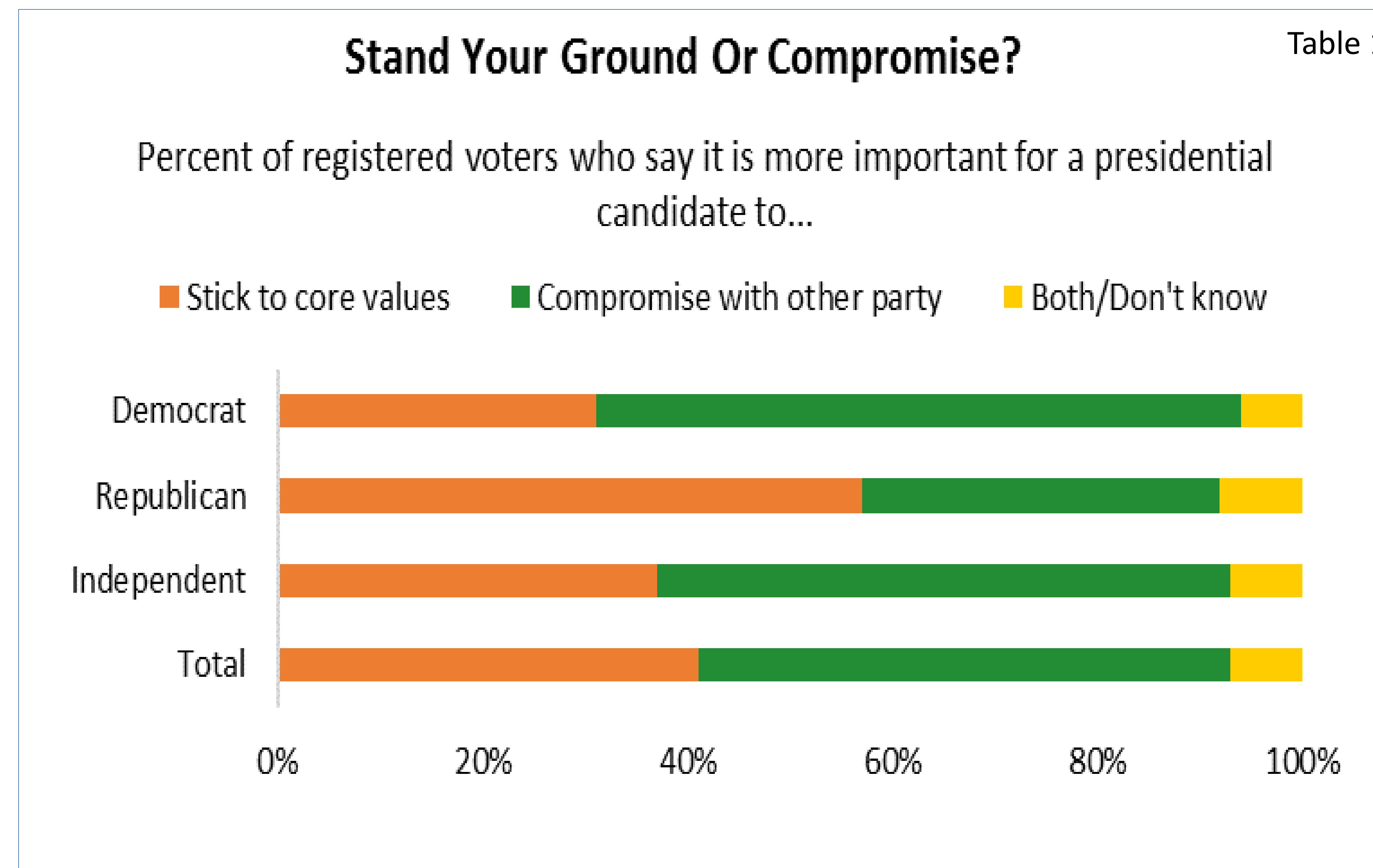
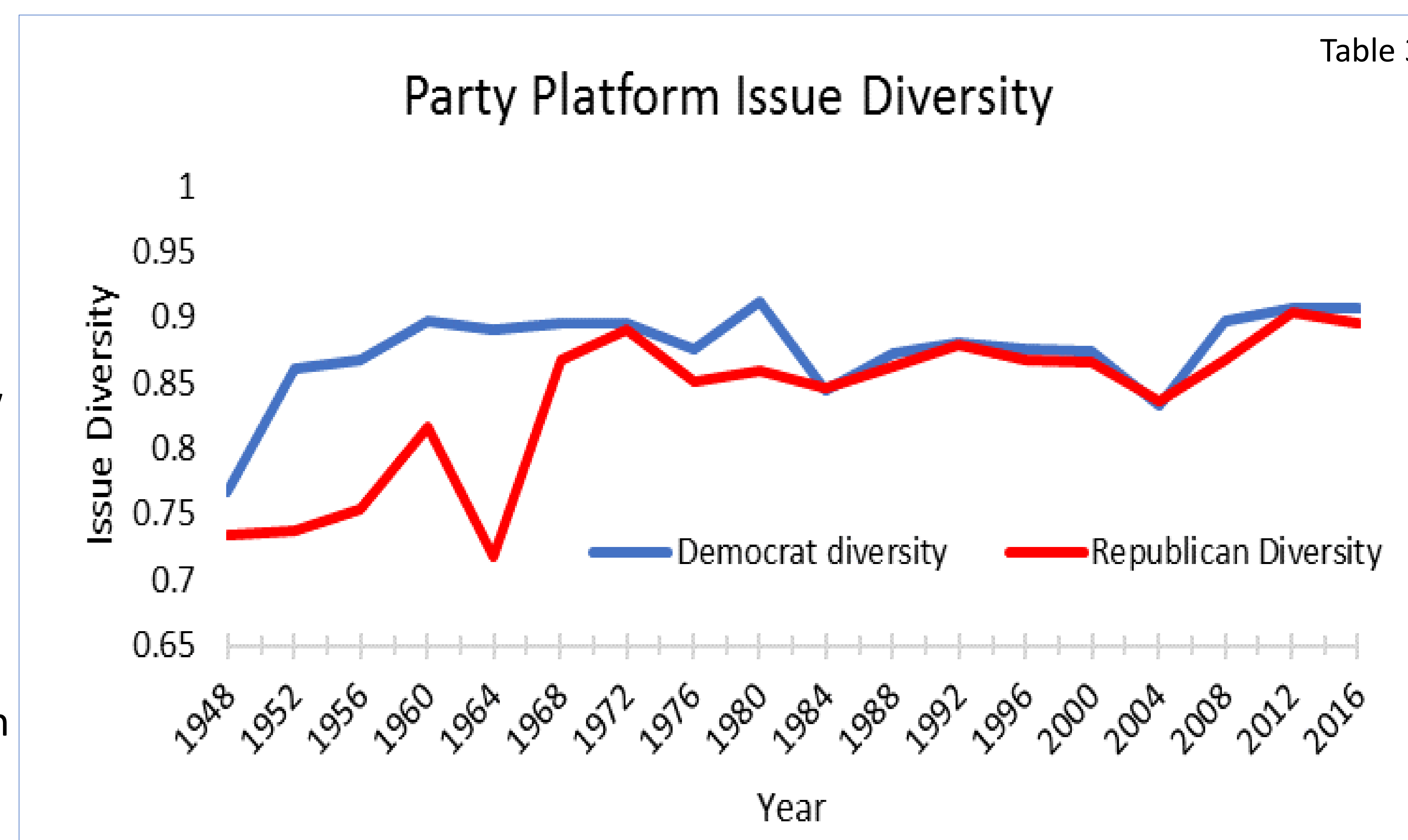


Table 2

$$\text{Normalized Shannon's } H = \frac{\sum_{i=0}^n (p(x_i)) * \ln p(x_i)}{\ln(N)}$$

x_i represents total observations in a major topic,
 $P(x_i)$ is the proportion of total attention the major topic receives,
 $\ln(x_i)$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the major topic receives and
 N is the total number of observations in all the topics.



Results and Discussion

Republican issue diversity from the 1940's through the 1960's was significantly lower than the Democrats issue diversity. But issue diversity differences collapsed in the 1970's onward.

Democrats only prefer compromise in the abstract.

Republicans may have expanded their voter base in the late 60's as an attempt to garner more voters after losing many elections to the Democrats. Republicans could also have lashed back at the Democrat's expanding policy agenda. Increasing coverage of issues formally occupied by Democrats, even if in a negative light, would still reflect an increase in issue diversity.

Future Research

Including an entry in the Party Platform data set that includes attitude could enable future researchers to determine whether the increase in Republican issue diversity was caused by attempts to reach new voting blocks or simply lash back.

Analyze polling data to see whether Republican and Democrat voters have a strong opinion on many issues or only a few.

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