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"A House Divided?": Measuring the Extent of Polarization by Analyzing Voter Turnout and Partisan Views

Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institute perhaps declared the current sentiment of the American people when he said that "American politics today is characterized by a growing ideological polarization between the two major political parties."[1] Much of this perceived polarization is due to the vocal extreme voters, polarizing party leaders, and obnoxious special-interest groups which seem to gain most of the media coverage. Sadly, Americans have even begun to believe that a large percentage of voters in the United States are unreasonable and cannot be swayed from their extreme partisan views. This paper presents the idea that perhaps political party affiliations and voter turnout have become slightly polarized but that single-issue views can be swayed over time, even among those who self-identify as more extreme voters.

Congress has a 12 percent approval rating today largely because it is filled with extreme candidates and has become a distorted legislative body which no longer accurately represents the full spectrum of political views that exist in the United States. In August 2011, the arguments in congress about whether to raise the debt ceiling often bordered on the absurd and Americans recognized that the squabbling was unprofessional and frankly, quite childish. However, Joseph Bafumi would argue that Americans should have expected this. After all, "members of Congress are more extreme than their constituents … and there is a lack of congruence between American voters and members of Congress."[2] Bafumi goes on to show that only 5 out of 72 of the United States senators in the 36 largest states have voting records which place them between the policy

[1] "Thomas E. Mann: Bio - Brookings Institution." *Brookings - Quality. Independence. Impact.* Web. 08 Dec. 2011. http://www.brookings.edu/experts/mannt.aspx?more=ex.
[2] Bafumi, Joseph; Herron, Michael. "Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress" *American Political Science Review*. 104.3 (2010): 519-542.

preferences of the median democratic voter and median republican voter in their respective states. Similarly, not one of the 158 members of the US House of Representatives which represent California, Texas, New York, Florida, or Illinois (the five largest states) has a voting record which falls between the median democratic and median republican voters.[3]

However, the fact that congress is polarized does not necessarily imply that American voters have deeply divided policy preferences. This logical fallacy stems from the reality that voters do not have a choice between an infinite number of candidates, each clearly identifying their positions on a multitude of issues. In practice, voters can only choose between two, maybe three, candidates who are sometimes quite dissimilar. As Morris Fiorina writes, "even if the positions of voters remain constant [from year to year], their voting decisions and political evaluations will appear more polarized when the positions candidates adopt and the actions elected officials take become more extreme."[4] Moreover, in "Purple America", Stephen Ansolabehere argues that most Americans are ideological moderates on both economic and moral issues and that there is very little difference in opinion from state to state. He cites that "the difference between 'strongly Republican' states like Kansas and 'strongly Democratic' states like California is, on average, only 8 percentage points in the vote."[5] Ansolabehere makes the case that there is not increasing political polarization among individual Americans, but rather an increasing political convergence.

Many political scientists including David King have taken Fiorina's line of thinking one step further and asked how these 2 or 3 relatively extreme candidates become the only choices on the ballot in November from which voters can choose. King notes that the voters who turn out to the Democratic and Republican primary elections "have more extreme preferences than those who

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[3] Bafumi, Joseph ; Herron, Michael. "Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress" *American Political Science Review*. 104.3 (2010): 519-542.
[4] Fiorina, Morris P., Samuel A. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope. "Polarization in the American Public: Misconceptions and Misreadings." *The Journal of Politics* 70.02 (2008): pg 556.
[5] Ansolabehere, Stephen, Jonathan Rodden, and James M. Snyder. "Purple America." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20.2 (2006): pg 99.

turn out for general elections"[6], making it difficult for moderate candidates to gain the party nomination slot on the November general election ballot. Thus, examining primary elections is a valuable exercise in understanding both party affiliation and voter turnout.

While Ansolabehere and Fiorina perhaps overstate the convergence of individual Americans' political opinions, these scholars do raise an important point: party affiliation and voter turnout do not necessarily correlate with political opinions on specific issues. It is possible for polarized party affiliation and voter turnout to still be compatible with a wide range of views on specific issues.

Methods:

Data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) general Time Series Study was utilized for a series of analyses regarding voter turnout and intensity of partisan opinions. The seven-point scale for self identification of political party affiliation was used as the baseline references to party identification in all of the figures. These seven categories are Strong Democrat (SD), Weak Democrat (WD), Democratic-leaning Independent (DI), Independent (I), Republican-leaning Independent (RI), Weak Republican (WR), and Strong Republican (SR). The full education spectrum provided by ANES was collapsed into five categories in the interest of clarity:

Abbreviation in Figures	*Education Level*
'Less'	< 12 Years, No High School Diploma
'High School'	Obtained HS Diploma, No further schooling
'Some College'	Community College OR Attended Post-Secondary Institution without Obtaining Degree
'Bachelors'	Obtained 4-year Bachelors Degree
'Advanced'	Obtained Advanced Degree (JD, PhD, MD, etc)

[6] Shigeo Hirano, James M. Snyder, Jr., Stephen Ansolabehere and John Mark Hansen (2010) "Primary Elections and Partisan Polarization in the U.S. Congress", *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 5:No 2, pg 175.

In order to gauge intensity of party opinions, the answers to two different questions were plotted as a function of political party self- identification:

Question 1: Which party do you think would do a better job of handing the nation's economy…the Democrats, the Republicans, or wouldn't there be much difference between them?

Question 2: Looking ahead, do you think the problem of keeping out of war would be handled better in the next four years by the Republicans, by the Democrats, or about the same by both?

The question about the economy (question 1) was chosen because the response directly equates with like or dislike for a political party. For example, it is obvious if one believes that the Democrats would handle the economy better, then they cannot also believe the Republicans would do a better job regarding the economy.

The question about war (question 2) serves as an indicator of whether Americans are ever able to hold a similar opinion independent of political party affiliation. For example, it would be reasonable for someone to believe that the Democrats would be more likely to keep the country out of war and still believe that the Republicans would do a better job regarding war overall. In theory, 100 percent of Americans could agree on a policy decision in a specific year even if they couldn't agree to support a specific political party's overarching ideologies on that issue.

Results:

Figure 1 shows that the composition of voters at the polls in November is not a uniform function across the political spectrum. Figure 1C is a pictorial representation of voters only for the single year 1988, but the equivalent graphics (displayed in Appendix A) for other years display similar trends in that there are generally more self-identifying partisans than self-identifying independents.

Figures 1A and 1B show that close to 45 percent of primary election voters self-identify as strong partisans. At least for 1988, those who turn out to primary elections are slightly more likely to be strong partisans than the average voter in the general election. This can be determined because the ratio of the percentage of strong partisans to the percentage of weak partisans in either of the two primaries is greater than the same ratio for either party in the general election. While strong republicans are not synonymous with "extreme conservatives" and strong democrats are not synonymous with "extreme liberals", these strong partisans are significantly more likely to support their own party.

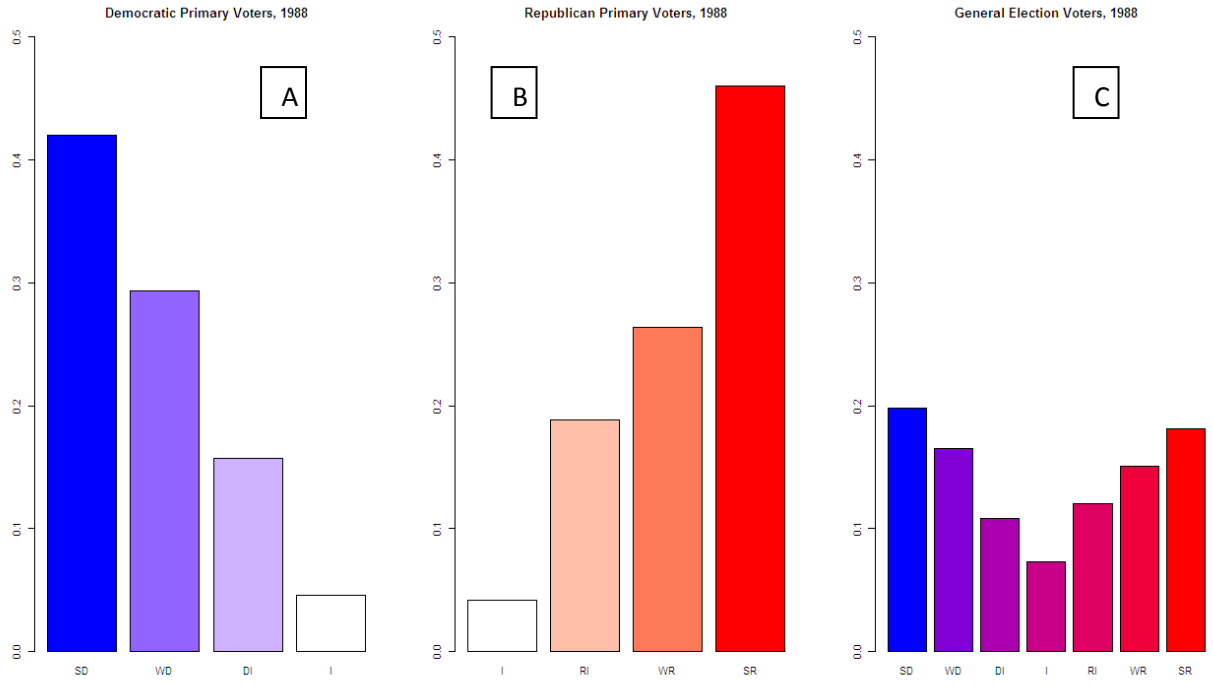


Figure 1: Percent composition of [A] Voters in Democratic Party Primary, [B] Voters in Republican Party Primary, and [C] Voters in General Election as a function of Political Party Self-Identification (1988)

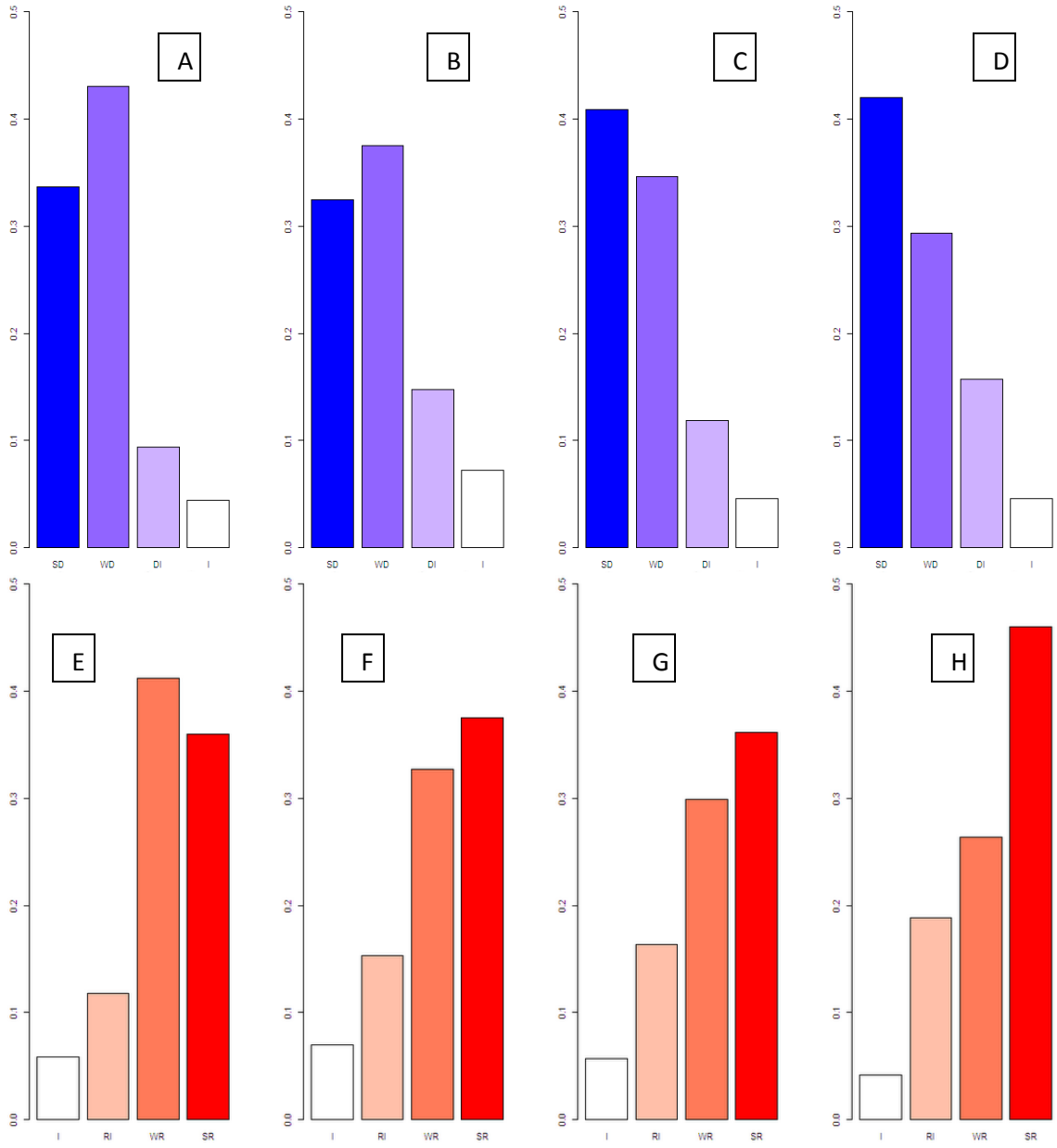


Figure 2: Percent Composition of [A-D] Voters in Democratic Party Primary and [E-H] Voters in Republican Party Primary as a function of Political Party Self-Identification (1976-1988)

Figure 2 displays the composition of voters in selected Democratic and Republican primaries over a period of sixteen years. For both political parties, the percent of voters who were strong partisans rose steadily to a total gain of about 10 percent over the 16 year period. The gain in strong partisans was offset by a steady drop in weak partisans over the same time period. Not only is the average primary voter slightly more extreme than the average general election voter [Figure 1], but the average primary voter appears to becoming more extreme over time [Figure 2].

One potential cause of this increase in extreme voters for primary elections comes from the reality that educated people turn out to vote at higher rates than uneducated people, even when controlled for income. Those who are educated are more likely to have stronger knowledge and opinions about the candidates or issues at stake than those who have little or no knowledge. For this reason, it has been argued that education correlates with extreme voters. Therefore, in theory, education level could be a link between extreme voters and primary elections.

However, figure 3 shows that there are roughly the same percentages of voters with different education levels across the democratic primary election, the republican primary election, and the general election. Although figure 3 is limited to the year 1988, the same trend is shown across the equivalent graphics (displayed in Appendix B) for other years. It is worth noting that the total percentage of those receiving at least some college education on top of the high school diploma increased steadily over the 16 year period in question. It is a possibility (but by no means endorsed in this paper) that the increase in overall polarization – even in the general election – could be due in part to the rising education levels across the country.

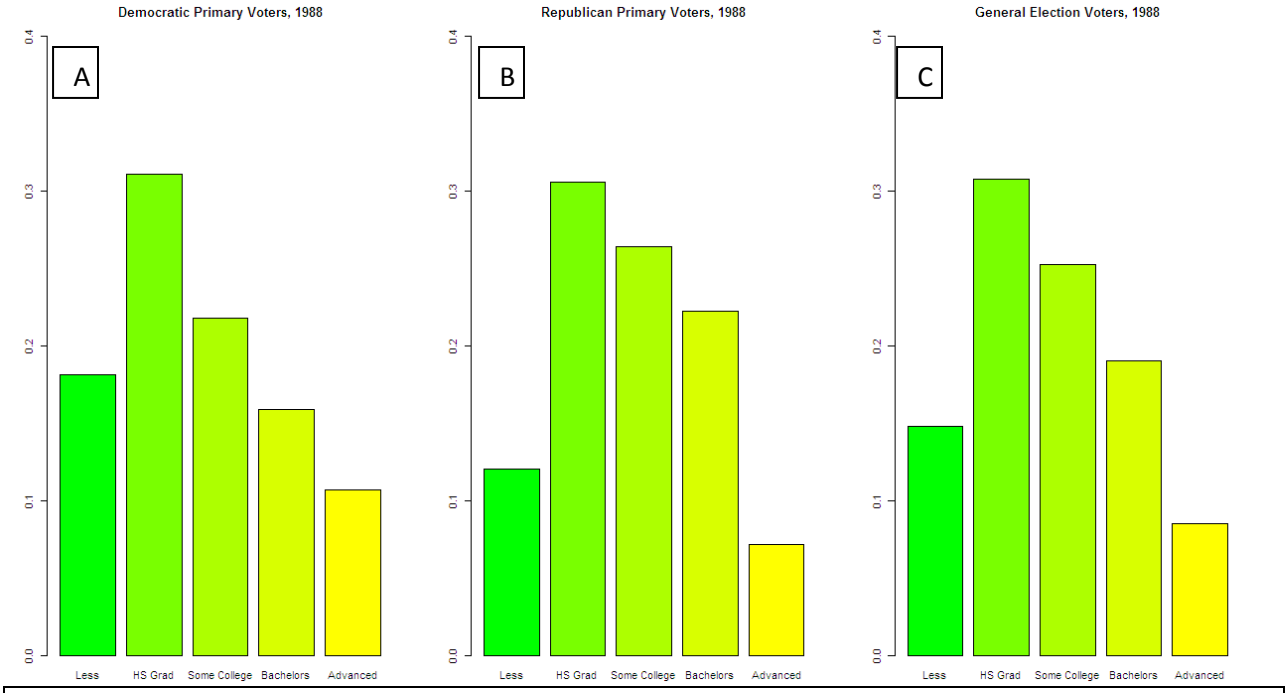


Figure 3: Percent Composition of [A] Voters in Democratic Party Primary, [B] Voters in Republican Party Primary, and [C] Voters in General Election as a Function of Education Level Attained (1988)

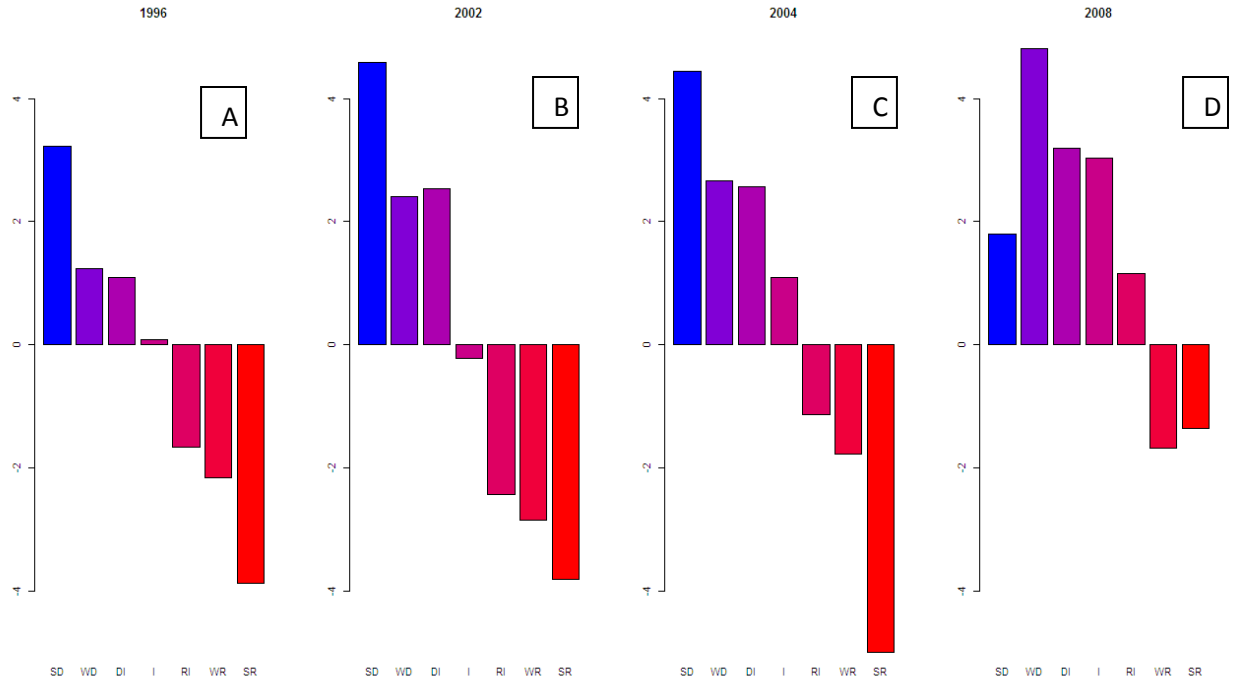


Figure 4: Agreement Index amongst voters within each of the 7 Party-Identification subgroups when asked question about the Economy[1]

[1] Which party do you think would do a better job of handing the nation's economy… the Democrats, the Republicans, or wouldn't there be much difference between them?

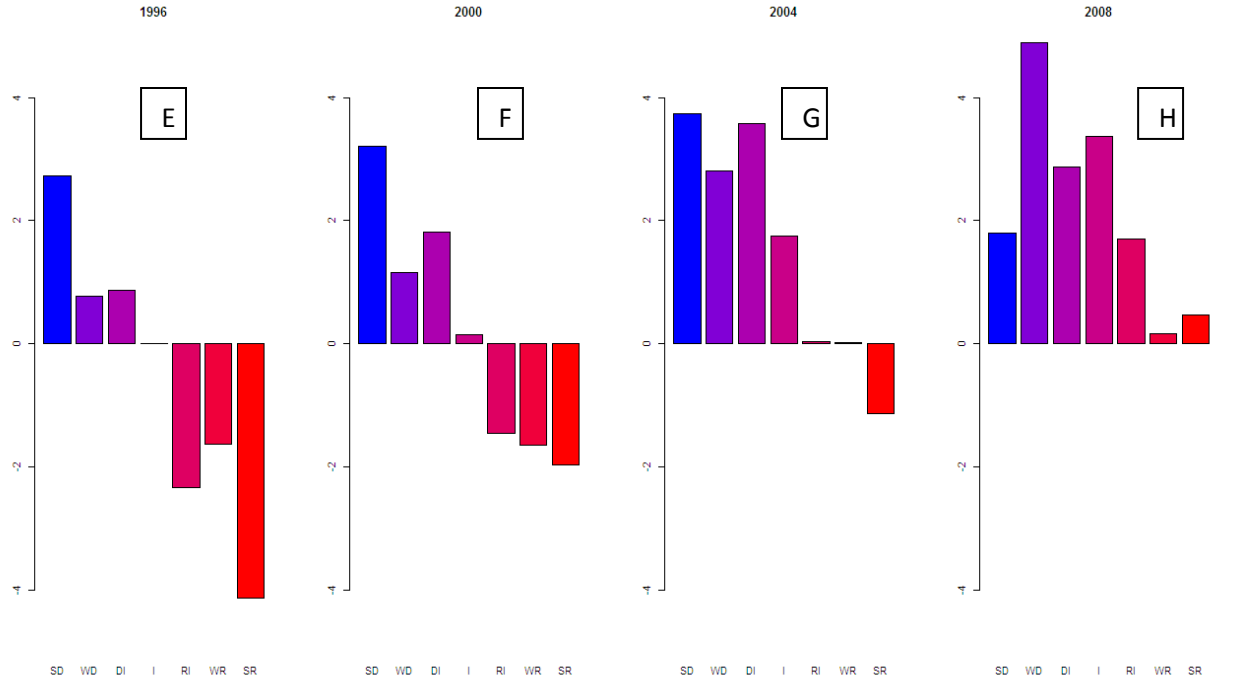


Figure 5: Agreement Index amongst voters within each of the 7 Party-Identification subgroups when asked question about War[2]

[2] Looking ahead, do you think the problem of keeping out of war would be handled better in the next four years by the Republicans, by the Democrats, or about the same by both?

Note: Agreement Index (AI) is the logarithm of the ratio of the number of pro-Democratic Responses to the number of pro-Republican responses. (AI)= log[(number of pro-Democratic responses)/(number of pro-Republican responses)]. Thus, a positive Agreement Index is indicative of overwhelmingly favorable opinion of Democrats, a negative Agreement Index is indicative of overwhelmingly favorable opinion of Republicans, and a roughly zero Agreement Index is indicative of a split between favorable opinion of Democrats and Republicans.

As was referenced in the 'Methods' section of this paper, the purpose of figures 4 and 5 is to show that perhaps Americans have more agreement on individual policy preferences than the prevailing political climate would suggest.

Figure 4A shows that there was little agreement between individual Americans on issues related to the economy in 1996. Even democratic-leaning independents (DI) and republican-leaning independents (RI) supported their preferred party (according to party self-identification) at very high rates with true independents (I) perfectly split between the two parties. According to this data, it could be said that when it came to opinions on the economy in 1996, individual Americans were actually split along Party lines. However, by 2008 (figure 4D), true independents (I) and republican-leaning independents (RI) were in overwhelming support of the democrats when it came to issues regarding the economy. This data implies that not only could much of America actually agree on which party would better handle the economy, but that there was no true split along Party lines.

Even if a strong partisan is not willing to formally concede that the opposing political party handles an issue better on average (such as is the case in figure 4), he or she may be willing to indirectly concede that the opposing party is preferred in a particular instance. For instance, although this is by no means a universal truth, most people would assume that keeping out of war is a good thing. Regardless, it would be safe to assume that if a person believes a certain political party will be more likely to keep out of war, it is indicative of at least a minimum level of approval for that political party. Figure 5 shows the reader that a true political split among individual Americans in 1996 (figure 5A) gave way to a relative agreement in 2008 (figure 5D) on the issue of which party would be best at keeping out of war. The data from Figure 5 illustrates that strong partisans are willing to side with the opposite party on specific issues and implies that

those unreasonable, extreme partisans shown on the television are not as common as one would expect. Fiorina would be smiling at this conclusion.

Conclusions:

It has long been recognized that primary elections are incredibly important in a two party system. Primaries and caucuses are able to weed out candidates who are either unqualified or too extreme for the electorate. However, like two funnels positioned side-by-side, perhaps there is no candidate that can emerge from the primary season who has truly moderate views. It appears that the ratio of strong partisans to overall voters in primary elections outstripped the same ratio in the subsequent general elections, and this conclusion should be of concern to the average American voter. However, the obvious limitation of this data analysis is the fact that this data from ANES is two-decades old. If the results of this paper were to be extended into a longer study, it would be necessary and enlightening to somehow obtain data from all elections over the last 40 years. But despite the time gap, we can say that there was indeed an increasingly partisan turnout in primary elections over the 1970 and 1980s.

The variable of education levels did not appear to be the cause or even correlated with this increasingly partisan turnout for primary elections. Of course this does not mean that education hasn't had an effect on primary election turnout over the last 20 years: the data could prove that there has been an increase in partisan turnout as increasing numbers of Americans have access to higher education.

Figures 4 and 5 were encouraging for those who believe that the partisan divide of individual Americans is overstated. While we did observe a sizeable shift in public opinion on two distinctly different issues related to the economy and keeping out of war (Douglas Hibbs'

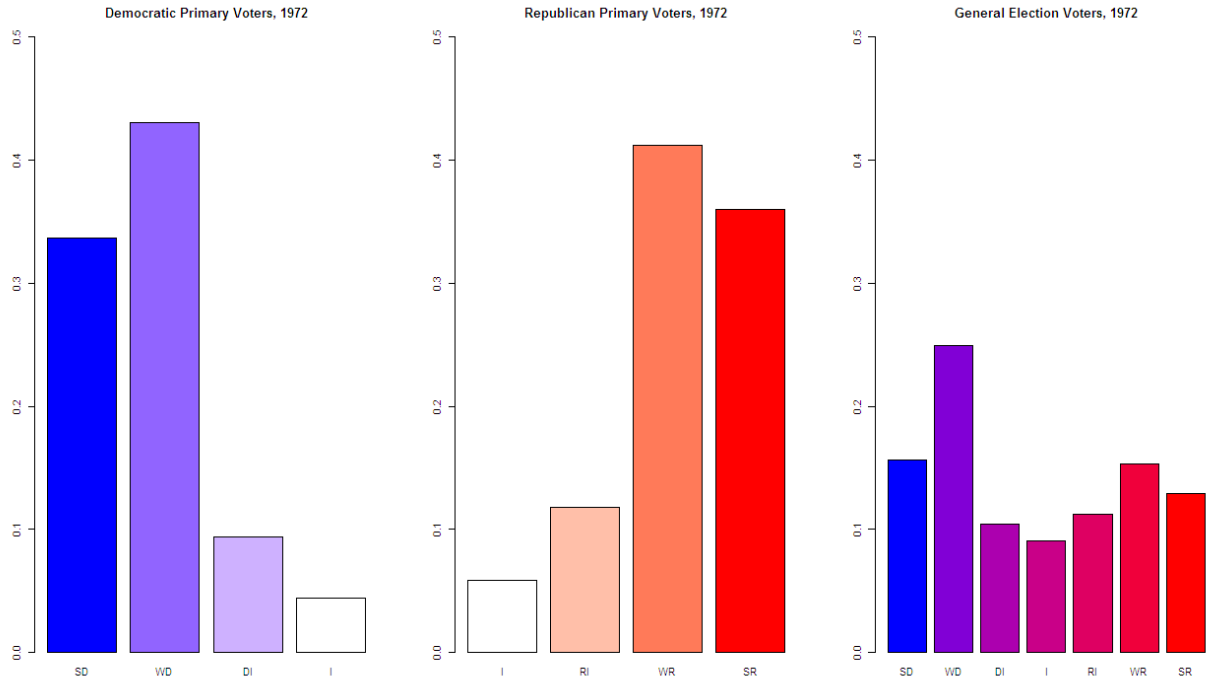
Bread and Peace?![7]), it would be valuable to extend this new "Agreement Index" to the primary/general election hypothesis and see if those who turn out for primary elections are not only more partisan but also more inflexible in their support of their chosen political party. More explicitly, it would be telling if figure 5H could be contrasted with the similar figure which could be obtained from the responses of primary election voters.

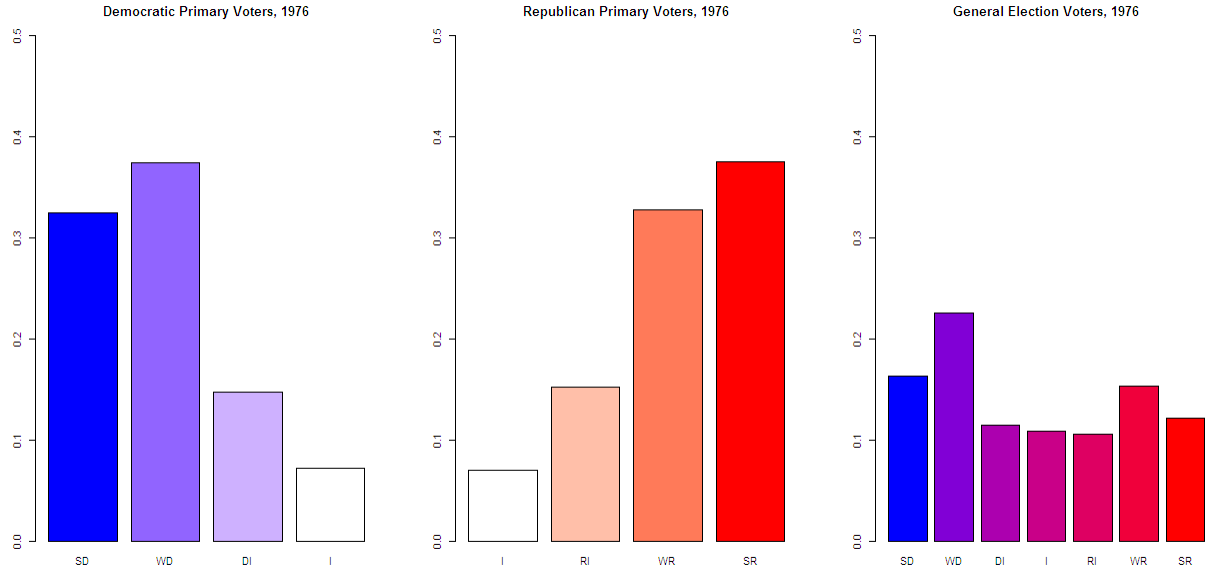
This data analysis could emphasize that our country is less polarized than one would ordinarily think. This would point to our most coveted measure of polarization (the composition of congress) as a failed rubric for evaluation. In this case, it would be prudent to investigate polarization using two of the measurements outlined in this paper. One measure of polarization is the Agreement Index, a valuable tool which allows us to track the relative strengths of each political party as well as partisanship itself over time by utilizing public opinions on the issues. A second measure of polarization is the composition of voter turnout, both in primary and general elections. Both must be addressed to gain a complete picture of the extent of polarization in the American public today.

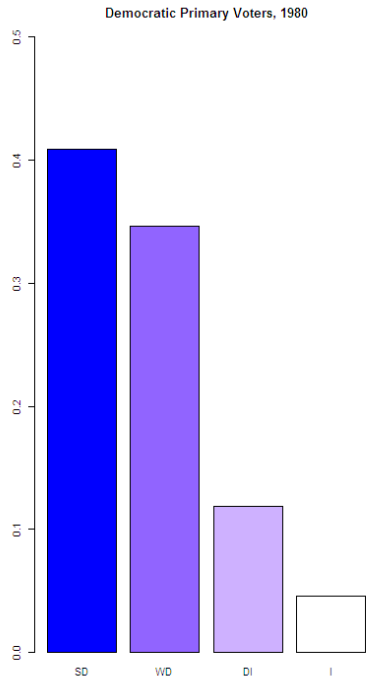
[7] Hibbs, Douglas A. "Implications of the 'Bread and Peace' Model for the 2008 US Presidential Election." *Public Choice* 137.1-2 (2008): 1-10.

APPENDIX A:

Percent composition of Voters in Democratic Party Primary, Voters in Republican Party Primary, and Voters in General Election as a function of Political Party Self-Identification (1972, 1976, 1980, 1988)






Democratic Primary Voters, 1980
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WD
DI
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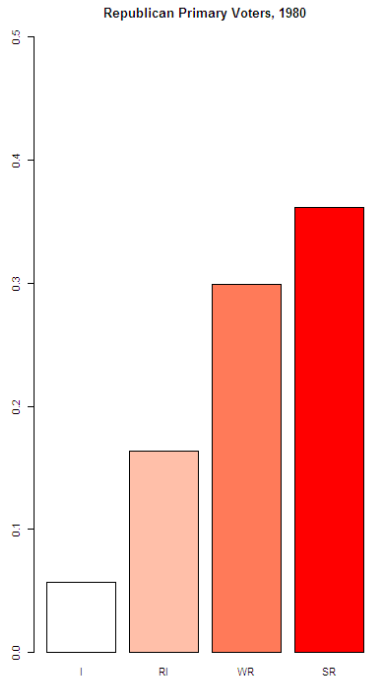
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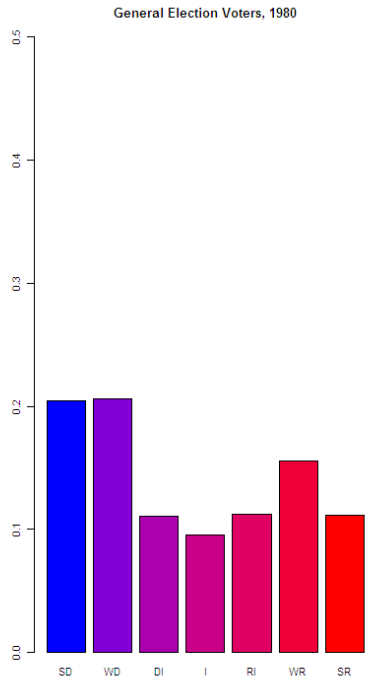
RI
WR
SR


General Election Voters, 1980
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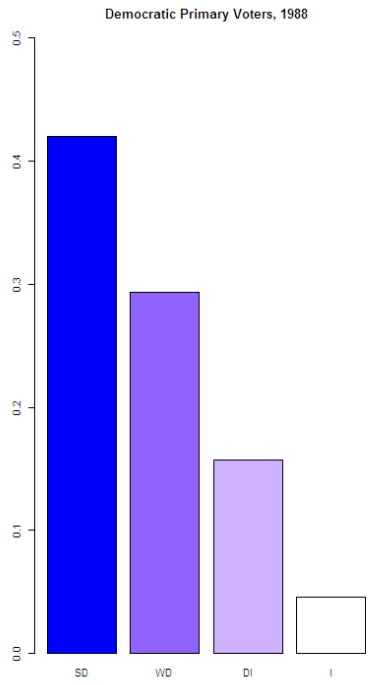
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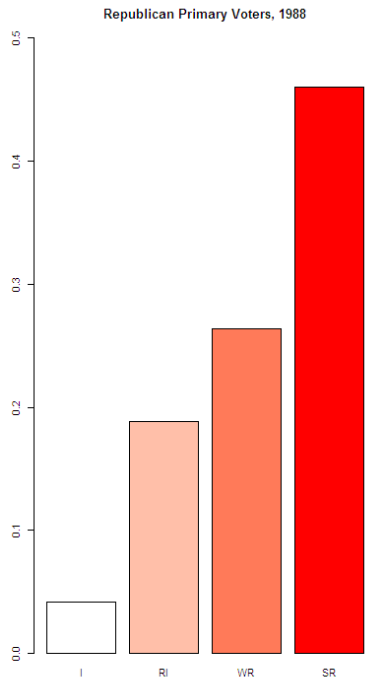
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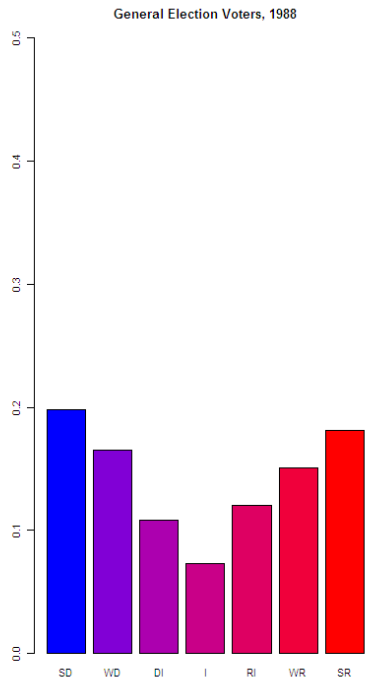
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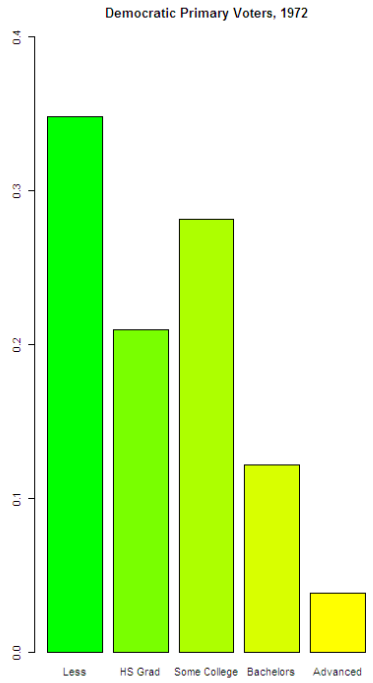
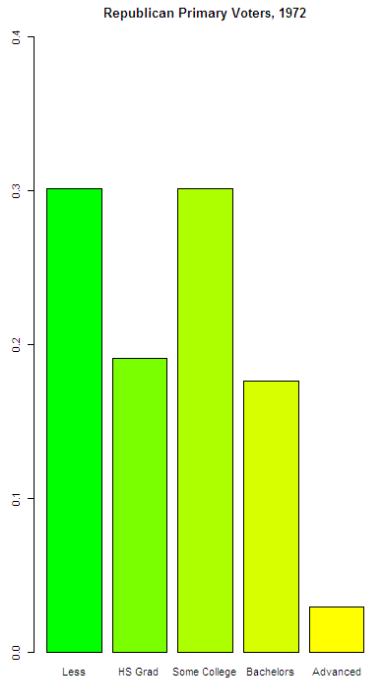
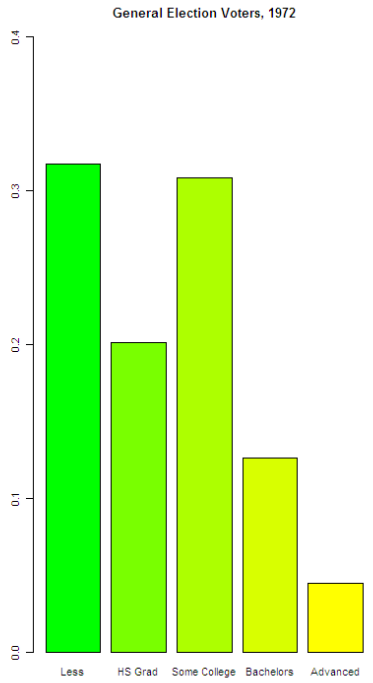
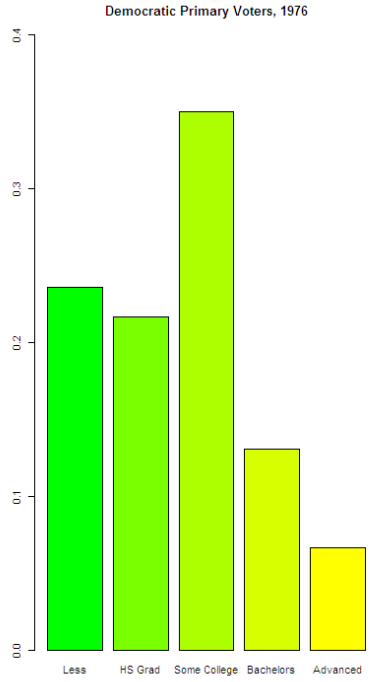
APPENDIX B:

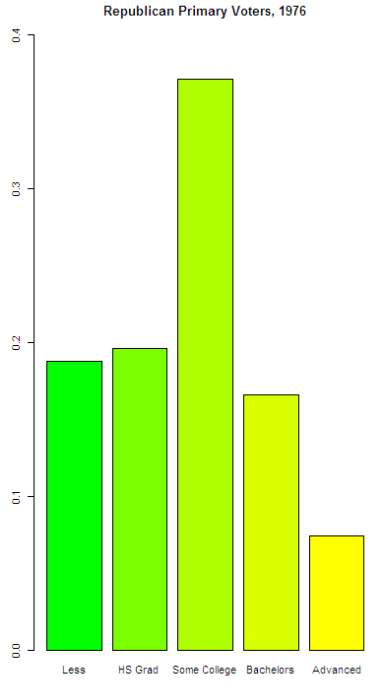
Percent Composition of Voters in Democratic Party Primary, Voters in Republican Party Primary, and Voters in General Election as a Function of Education Level Attained (1972, 1976, 1980, 1988)

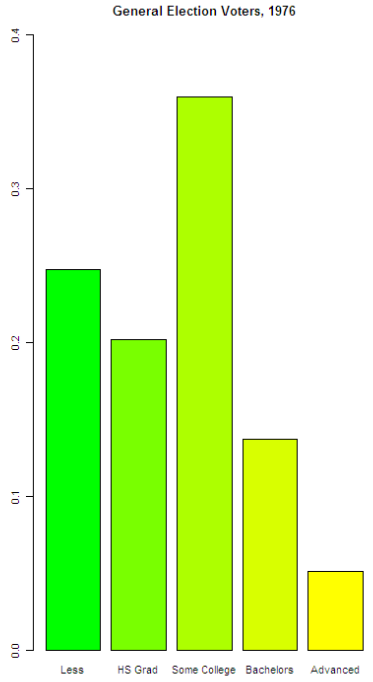


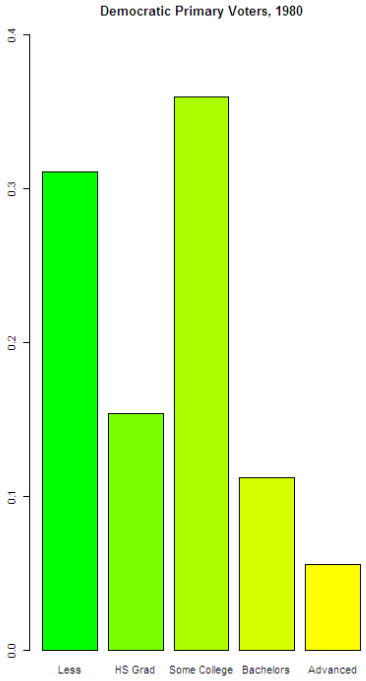











Democratic Primary Voters, 1980
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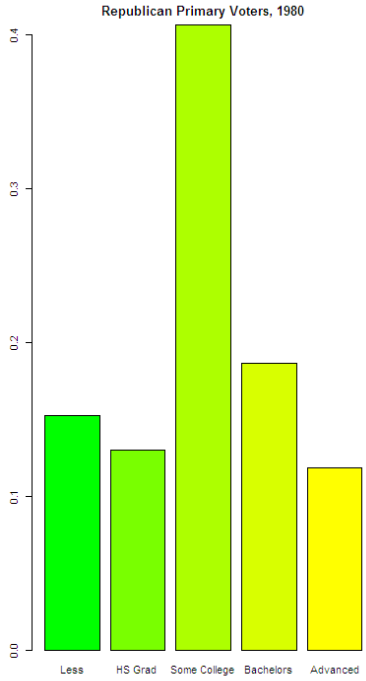
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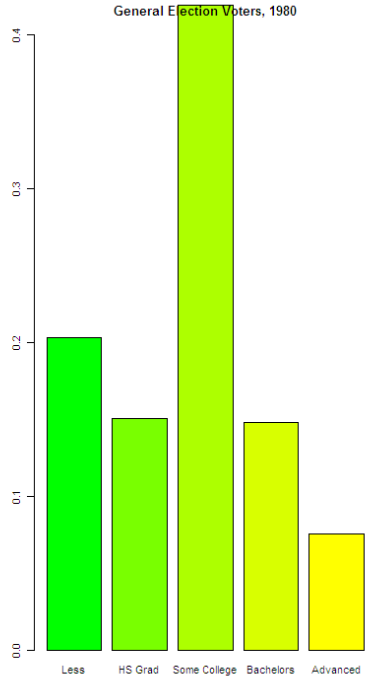
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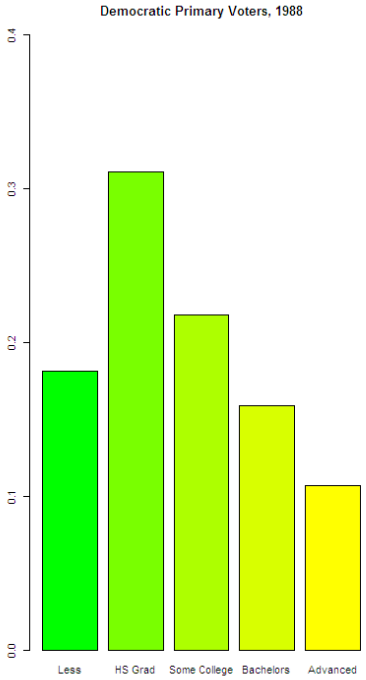
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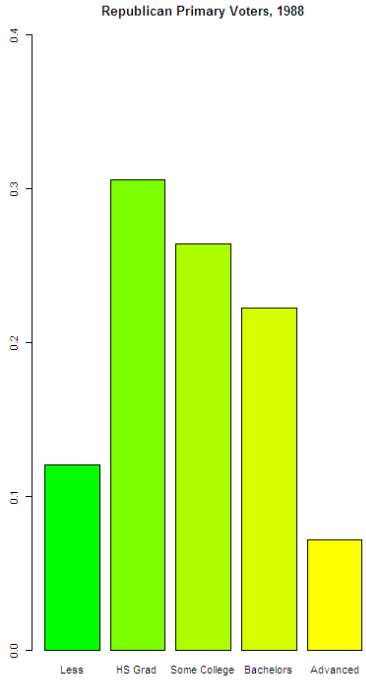
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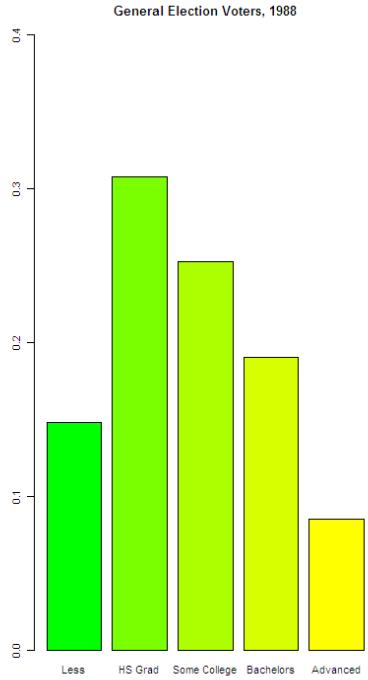
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