Chapter 4

The Right, the Left, and the Ladder

How Inequality Divides Our Politics

It must have been disorienting for the Baron de Gauville, surrounded by the familiar luxury of the palace of Versailles, to find himself so close to chaos. By 1791 France's traditional assembly, the Estates General, had been replaced by one new version of parliament after another, each splintering into bickering factions before collapsing into the next incarnation. King Louis XVI vacillated between persuasion and force as he struggled to remain in possession of his country and, eventually, his head.

As the newest version of parliament met for the first time, the members sorted themselves amid the confusion into groups of like-minded men. De Gauville reported, "We began to recognize each other: those who were loyal to religion and the king took up positions to the right of the [king's] chair so as to avoid the shouts, oaths, and indecencies that enjoyed free rein in the opposing camp." The militant revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow the monarchy, and those who were dedicated to the rational ethos of the Enlightenment rather than the authority of the Church, meanwhile, drifted to the left side. Those with more moderate views occupied the center of the room.

Though unplanned, the seating arrangement was not entirely unpredictable. In the old Estates General, the king had invited the clergy (the first estate) and the nobility (the second estate) to sit at his right, and the working people (the third estate) to take seats at his left. As in many cultures around the world, in the Judeo-Christian tradition favored parties are granted seats on the right. In the Bible, Jesus sits at the right hand of God. In French *gauche* literally means "left," but in English we use the term to mean "inelegant" or "unsophisticated," much like the "shouts, oaths, and indecencies" de Gauville disdained. Similarly, French *à droite* (to the right) became the English "adroit," meaning "skillful" or "talented." By the time de Gauville was describing events of the French Revolution, the king was no longer telling the noblemen where

to sit, yet his supporters seemed more comfortable at his right, and his enemies at his left.

In the weeks that followed, writers reporting news of the assembly began referring to the various factions with the shorthand of “the left,” “the right,” and “the center.” “Right” and “left” thus became ensconced in our political vocabulary as descriptions for conservatives and liberals, respectively. If the assembly hall at Versailles had been laid out differently, we might speak today of conservatives as the “front” and liberals as the “rear.”

Despite their origins in historical accident, the labels retain some of their original connotation. Is the political right good and the left bad? The question is, good for *whom*? From the perspective of the king, the traditionalists who wanted to preserve the monarchy and the old ways of doing things were good, while those who wanted to change the rules of society were bad. They were indeed good and bad—but only from the point of view of people in command in traditional power structures. That was true in eighteenth-century France, and it is true today.

It is not always obvious why a particular issue lines up with the liberal or conservative perspective. Why should someone who supports a woman’s right to have an abortion also want to raise taxes on people with high incomes? Why should the same person who believes in the right to own assault rifles also distrust the scientific findings on climate change? Why would people’s attitudes toward illegal immigration be linked with their views on gay marriage?

Political psychologists have proposed a lot of schemes over the years to explain the core ways in which conservatives and liberals differ. Are they the product of strict versus permissive parenting? A function of rigid versus fluid thinking? Religious versus secular worldviews? Psychologist John Jost reviewed the historical perspectives and dozens of empirical studies and found that the left and the right consistently differ from each other in two fundamental ways.

The first and most obvious is that conservatives generally want to preserve tradition and the status quo, while liberals want to see changes in society. This distinction between tradition and change looks different, however, from their respective points of view. Conservatives don’t prefer the status quo simply for the sake of keeping things the same. They tend to believe, like the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, that a society in chaos is the worst possible condition. Conservatives are therefore sensitive to threats to social order, be they external (rival armies) or internal (potential revolutionaries). Civil order is difficult to achieve, and conservatives believe we should work to safeguard it. That usually means trusting in traditional ways of doing things that have been tested by time. If that means forgoing some opportunities to improve society by changing its rules, it is a price worth paying.

Similarly, liberals don't want change just for the sake of change, but tend to view some aspects of society as working well and others as working poorly. Established ways of doing things have led to both, so they are not especially impressed with tradition and feel compelled to change the things they think are dysfunctional. They tend to have more confidence than conservatives do in the power of human reason to find rational solutions to problems. Following in the footsteps of philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke, they are motivated to keep rewriting the rules of society in order to keep improving it.

The second fundamental distinction between conservatives and liberals is their willingness to accept inequality. Again, most conservatives do not want inequality for its own sake. Instead, they view it as an outcome of an emphasis on individual rights, abilities, and responsibilities. When individuals outcompete others, the result is always some degree of inequality. Contrary to the perceptions of many liberals, most conservatives aren't animated by the idea of hierarchy itself. They just aren't bothered by it the way liberals are.

Liberals, contrary to the perspective of many conservatives, are not hostile to the idea of individual rights and responsibilities, or market competition. Instead, they see individual merit as just one factor among many that determines success or failure in a competitive market. They tend to consider the economic system as a whole rather than just the individual players within it, which means taking into account such factors as monopolies, old-boy networks, institutional racism and sexism, and cycles of advantage and disadvantage that shape people's outcomes for reasons that have nothing to do with individual virtues. They have no special love of "big government" and are often puzzled by conservatives' apparent obsession with the size of government. Liberals see both government policies and markets as useful, but imperfect, tools for improving society.

Ultimately, life is too complex to assess it from a single point of view. As liberals like to emphasize, we know from statistics and from experience that most people who start out with nothing end up poor, and most people who start off affluent remain so. Nonetheless, as conservatives often point out, individual talent and responsibility can be powerful. Some exceptional individuals are able to transcend poverty and limited opportunity to achieve great success. What is true of a system in general is not necessarily true of all the individuals within it. Consider a murmuration of starlings.

Figure 4.1. A murmuration of starlings.

Each bird in this marvelously named flock flies according to its own self-interest. By staying within the flock, an individual bird is protected from hawks and other predators. No single bird knows where the flock is heading next, and there is no leader directing the group. Each bird simply watches and listens to others nearby and tries to stay close to them. When ten thousand starlings all follow the same simple rule, the result is an astonishing shadow undulating across the landscape, a wave one moment and a whirlpool the next, then suddenly a spiraling helix, coming apart like a mammoth amoeba, then merging, whole again. As poet Richard Wilbur put it, “What is an individual thing? They roll / Like a drunken fingerprint across the sky!”

When you focus on the swarm as a whole, it appears to be a single organism, and it is difficult to keep track of the individuals within it. And yet if you focus on the movements of an individual starling, its behavior is not the same as the flock as a whole. At any moment, the bird may be moving forward when the flock is moving left. It may be diving when the column is swirling. Like a visual illusion that registers as a duck one moment and a rabbit the next, it is impossible to see both the individuals and the whole simultaneously.

The same is true of societies and economies: You can focus on the individual or the system, but it's hard to see both at once. Conservatives focus on the individuals within the system. This young man is responsible for getting a job. That young woman should make choices that enable her to avoid being a single mother. If they don't, then they suffer the consequences. Liberals look at the system and perceive that places where poverty is the norm just keep reproducing generations of poverty. Even when kids work hard, few can escape. If you want to predict who gets a job or who becomes a single mother, start by assessing their parents' incomes and the quality of their schools.

We saw in Chapter 3 that both perspectives are oversimplifications, because inequality in the society affects the behaviors of individuals, which leads in turn to greater inequality. Conservatives and liberals generally agree that individual responsibility, talent, and hard work are important factors in achieving success, and they agree that context matters as well. One group's main emphasis, however, is the other's background. When the system is in the spotlight, hierarchy and inequality come sharply into focus. When the individual is in the spotlight, hierarchy and inequality fall where they may.

We have seen that tradition versus change and hierarchy versus equality are two fundamental principles that orient moral compasses. Yet there is no philosophical reason why those who prefer tradition also have to accept hierarchy, or why those who prefer change should also desire equality. Jost and colleagues point out that it is not philosophy that makes these needles align, but history. Since the Enlightenment, many Western societies have gradually become less hierarchical. Monarchies have given way to democracies. Slavery has been abolished. Women and black people have gained the right to vote and became equal, at least in the eyes of the law. In the twenty-first century we have seen equality extended further to gay men and lesbians, transgender individuals, and others. Because of these historical trends, the old power structures that remain tend to be the more hierarchical, while new ones are more equal. A preference for tradition is therefore more likely to be accompanied by a tolerance for inequality, and preferences for change are more open to greater equality.

A fascinating historical exception shows that the link between preferences for traditional power structures and inequality is not inevitable. Psychologist Sam McFarland studied the beliefs of people in Russia in the 1990s. After decades of communist government that was authoritarian and yet promoted relative economic equality, the breakup of the Soviet Union led to dramatic increases in inequality. It was a turbulent time in which capitalist markets took hold with little or no regulation. Economic security for the average person evaporated, while a few well-connected individuals became billionaires. McFarland and his colleagues measured people's opinions about the new economic conditions and the degree of support for the old

communist days. They also assessed Russians' preferences for traditional authority and stability over change. In Russia, unlike North America and Western Europe, a respect for tradition was strongly correlated with a desire for greater equality. A longing for the ancien régime can therefore have different meanings, depending on the nature of that regime.

We have been talking about liberals and conservatives as different types of people, and of course, to some extent, they are. But categorizing people by their politics is another way that our stereotypes of people are much more rigid and extreme than the actual people themselves. All of us, from time to time, find ourselves thinking along the lines of "the other party," when the truth is that, politically speaking, we all contain multitudes.

Most days when I am at work, I walk along Franklin Street, Chapel Hill's main strip. On any trip along Franklin to get lunch or a cup of coffee, you can expect to be asked for money by a panhandler. I have been surprised by my own reactions to these overtures. Sometimes I hand over a bit of money; on most days I just say, "Sorry," and keep walking. But more disturbing to me than my inconsistent behavior are my inconsistent thoughts. Some days when I hear, "Spare change?" I look up and I see someone who is having a hard time. I see someone who probably didn't have much opportunity starting out, who had more than his fair share of bad luck, and who needs a little help when he is at his lowest. On other days, I see someone who is so irresponsible that he is lying in the bed that he has made for himself. Someone who might be gainfully employed if he put as much effort into getting up in the morning and going to work as he does into pestering other, working people for their money. Sometimes I have both these reactions in the span of an hour. Why does our stream of consciousness sometimes seem as if it has flipped channels between Paul Krugman and Rush Limbaugh?

Psychologists Aaron Kay and Richard Eibach argue that we each carry around an "ideological toolbox" in our heads. We think of our political beliefs as a stable set of principles supported by a solid foundation of logic and facts. But in fact they are more like an assortment of tools that we choose among depending on the demands of a particular moment. Sometimes the ideological principles we turn to depend on what we have been thinking about lately. If I read a news story about a crime committed by a homeless person a few minutes before my walk down Franklin Street, I am more likely to think about the next panhandler I see in negative terms, simply because those ideas have been brought recently to mind. Psychologists call this phenomenon "accessibility." Like Google, the mind keeps recently used ideas at the forefront of consciousness so that we can access them easily at a moment's notice. Accessibility does not follow rules of logical consistency. If I show you the words "ocean" and "moon," then ask you to name a good laundry detergent, you are likely to say, "Tide."

It doesn't matter that the laundry detergent is logically unrelated to oceans and moons. Having used an interconnected web of ideas recently, you are more likely to travel along that network in the future.

A second reason that our internal monologues can toggle between liberal and conservative channels is that we do not keep track of the logical consistency of our thoughts the way we believe we do. Psychologists Lars Hall, Petter Johansson, and colleagues showed how flexible our political opinions can be in a striking study of what they call "choice blindness." They surveyed voters in Sweden about a range of controversial issues during a national election campaign. Like the United States, Sweden is firmly divided between liberal and conservative parties. Although both are well to the left of their American counterparts, citizens are evenly distributed between them, with only about 10 percent undecided at the time of the study. The survey asked about twelve divisive issues on which the two parties disagreed—for example, should the gasoline tax be increased? should Sweden restart its nuclear energy program?—and the research subjects indicated their agreement or disagreement with each option. They also indicated how likely they were to vote for each party, how certain they were about their opinions, and how engaged they were in politics.

The survey was delivered to each participant on a clipboard. That might sound like a mundane detail, but it was actually the key to the experimenter's mischievous plan. As each subject filled in his answers, the experimenter watched him and secretly completed another survey that was identical, except for one small detail: The experimenter reversed the subject's answers to half of the questions. When the subject handed over his completed survey, the experimenter took it, made some notes in a notebook, and then handed the clipboard back. But through a magician's sleight of hand, the experimenter handed the subject the reversed survey instead. In a control condition, the original survey was returned to the subjects.

The subjects were then asked to explain why they expressed the opinions they did for each question. During this discussion, they were asked if they wanted to correct or adjust any of their answers before talking about them. Astonishingly, 47 percent of the subjects who received the reversed answers did not notice any changes at all. Of the other 53 percent, most people detected only one or two. Only one person was suspicious that the experimenters had switched his answers. The rest said that they had misread the question or accidentally marked the wrong answer. When they discussed their answers, subjects who failed to observe the switch gave perfectly reasonable arguments for positions they hadn't originally taken.

This is one of those experiments where it is impossible to put yourself in the position of the subjects. We simply can't imagine trying to explain why taxes should be cut when we just said they should be raised, or vice versa. Surely we would never fall for that sort of trickery, and yet nearly half of the people in the study did. Were

they just being polite, rather than correcting the experimenter? If so, then accepting the reversed opinions as their own should have no effect on subjects' actual beliefs. To test this idea, the experimenters asked subjects at the end of the study to rate, again, how likely they were to vote for one of the two parties in the upcoming election. In the control condition, the answers were virtually identical to voting intentions expressed at the beginning of the study. But in the reversed condition, subjects shifted their voting intentions significantly in the direction of the reversed answers.

Bizarrely, these shifts were just as strong for those who expressed great certainty in their vote at the start of the survey as for those who were more tentative. The shifts were equivalent for those highly engaged in politics and the disengaged; for liberals and conservatives; for men and women; for young and old. This finding, though striking, is not an anomaly. Hall and Johansson's team has repeated the same sleight-of-hand experiments using many kinds of preferences, from moral principles to attractiveness ratings of photographs to the taste of jam and tea. In every case, a large percentage—typically between 50 percent and 80 percent—fail to notice the switch and go on to give plausible-sounding reasons for choices they did not make.

At the end of each of these studies, the experimenters reveal the original survey and reversed responses, and the subjects are typically surprised and bemused at their own behavior. The beliefs they had taken to be strongly held turned out to be props that they could pick up and set aside as needed. These studies do not demonstrate that people lack political convictions, but they do show that, in at least some cases, the reasons we articulate to explain our decisions are not the real basis of those decisions. Such experiments cast doubt on whether our political principles really form the bedrock for our opinions as we assume. Our principles are, at best, just one source of information that shapes our political beliefs at any moment.

Daily life, of course, rarely involves sneaky psychologists plotting to upend our opinions. Simply directing people's attention to different aspects of their own lives can have a similar effect. In one study psychologist Christopher Bryan and colleagues surveyed undergraduate students at Stanford about their political opinions, including such topics as universal health care coverage, a flat tax, welfare and unemployment benefits, the death penalty, and other issues on which liberals and conservatives disagree. Before they completed the survey, however, the students were asked to spend ten minutes telling the story of how they got into Stanford. Half were asked specifically to comment on the role of their own "hard work, self-discipline and wise decisions," while the other were asked to comment on the role of "chance, opportunity and help from others." Gaining admission to an elite university like Stanford requires both individual merit and good fortune, so both groups had plenty to write about.

This seemingly minor shift in attention led to substantial differences in political attitudes on the survey. The group asked to consider their personal merit expressed more conservative opinions than the group that contemplated its good fortune. Regardless of their ideologies when they walked in the door, simply thinking about the role of individual merit or opportunities in their own lives affected their political viewpoints, at least for a while.

Emotion can be even more powerful than thoughts. Recall when you first heard about the planes that flew into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Most Americans (and many non-Americans, too) remember exactly where they were and what they were doing at that moment. For me, it was an old friend calling from Manhattan to say he was fine. I woke befuddled in an earlier time zone, turning on CNN to watch as the second plane struck. In my memory, the fog of waking is fused with the confusion of the event. My mental images of the smoldering white towers against a bright blue sky are punctuated by my questioning whether I was dreaming something that could not possibly be happening.

In the days that followed the terrorist attack, George W. Bush's approval rating rose from 51 percent to 90 percent, the highest recorded presidential approval rating in history. Millions of Americans who were antagonistic to the president on September 10 reversed their opinions almost overnight. The 9/11 attacks were not the first external threat America endured. Similar, though less pronounced, "rally 'round the flag effects" have been documented for other events, like the bombing of Pearl Harbor or the Iran hostage crisis. History shows, however, that conservative administrations have benefited more from this kind of rallying than liberal administrations. If Jost is right that people adopt conservative ideologies as a response against threats to the social order, then there should be a specific link between threats and support for conservative ideas.

In fact, there are decades' worth of studies supporting that association. Many of them examine correlations between people's personalities and their political beliefs. In study after study, subjects who see the world as a threatening and dangerous place tend to be more politically conservative. Those who see the world as safe, and who are motivated by exploring and trying new experiences, tend to support more liberal views. Of course, these correlations leave open the question of cause and effect. Do these emotional tendencies predispose people toward particular political ideologies, as the theory predicts? Or do conservative versus liberal mind-sets lead people to tune in to different emotional channels? Or are they both just a reflection of some other factor that causes both?

Several experiments have begun to isolate the specific relationship between emotions and ideologies. In one study, psychologists Alan Lambert, Laura Scherer, and colleagues made people feel threatened by showing them a video documentary

about the 9/11 attacks. Compared with a control group that simply completed some word puzzles, the 9/11 group expressed greater support for President Bush, more hawkish attitudes about the war in Iraq, and more liking for patriotic symbols like the American flag and the Statue of Liberty. Psychologist Mark Landau and colleagues asked a group of research subjects to vividly imagine what it would be like to die. They instructed them to describe their feelings in detail and to envision what would happen to their body after death. Compared with a control group, the death group was more supportive of President Bush and less supportive of John Kerry, who was running against him in the 2004 election at the time of the study.

Field studies lead to the same conclusion as the laboratory studies. The years following the 9/11 attacks were anxious ones for Americans. The newly formed Department of Homeland Security introduced a Terror Advisory System complete with a color-coded guide to alert citizens whether the risk of a terror attack was low (green), elevated (yellow), high (orange), or severe (red). Sociologist Robb Willer analyzed presidential approval ratings between 2001 and 2004 and found that whenever the terror alert increased, so, too, did approval ratings for President Bush. When the alerts subsided, presidential approval fell with them. The ebb and flow of threats from one day to the next pulls our ideologies in tow.

We normally speak of conservatives and liberals, not conservative moments and liberal moments. The truth is that we experience both. Sometimes we think through an issue based on our principles and end up at an ideological conclusion. At other times we take our cues from a particular situation and find an ideology that fits the moment. When we reflect on our own beliefs, it can be nearly impossible to tell the difference between the two approaches.

Of all the cues that nudge us to the left or the right, the role of wealth, poverty, and inequality has been one of the most vexing topics in recent memory. Our culture has conflicting narratives about how the haves and have-nots differ in their politics. Consider the lives of two very different individuals.

Earl drives a truck for a living, and mostly makes daylong trips like the ones to haul front loaders and excavators from Murfreesboro to Fort Wayne. When he gets home in the evening, he likes to open a can of beer and watch the local news. On the weekends, he views NASCAR races. When he misses one, he checks up on the driver standings in the newspaper, and still has the paper version delivered. Apart from that, he doesn’t have a lot of hobbies. When his youngest child left home, he thought he would take up gardening, but his weekends are more and more occupied with working on his aging house trailer. He’s got far more money in the Kenworth rig parked outside than in his home. He has rarely used the sleeper cabin in the truck, but it’s always an option if the house’s roof gets too bad.

David is on his third landscaper this year. The first was unreliable; the second kept chopping off the heads of the lawn sprinklers with the mower. Now his lawn is finally getting in shape to suit his newly built home on the cul-de-sac. He likes to say he designed it himself, but what he means is that he and his wife, Andrea, picked the finishes from the laminated pages of the builder's book. They saved for the house for five years and wanted it to be perfect, with four bedrooms plus an office, because they work a lot at home in the evenings. There's also an extra room that they use for fitness, so that their free weights and yoga mats are always at the ready. But they are proudest of the screened porch, where they drink coffee in the mornings from David's newest gadget, which siphons water through a series of glass tubes like a nineteenth-century science kit. As they sip, David reads the news on his phone and Andrea listens to NPR. Lately they've been discussing investing more for retirement.

It's amazing how much we can tell about people from these little glimpses into their lives. After such a brief introduction, do you feel that you know other things about Earl and David? Such as, who's more likely to go out for sushi? Who communicates with family members by yelling across the house, and who walks into the next room and speaks quietly? Who spent months agonizing over which school to send their children to?

Would you be surprised to learn that Earl is a born-again Christian and that he opposes same-sex marriage, but David thinks that gay people should be able to wed? You might also not be surprised to discover that David supports laws to restrict handgun ownership, but Earl supports the NRA. Or that Earl prefers a "small government" and thinks that income taxes should be cut.

You know the answers, of course. They are supplied by the images of conservatives and liberals rendered in fine detail in our heads. We can envision the conservatives packing the family off to church in the pickup truck to the tune of country music. We can imagine the liberals returning from the farmers' market, careful not to blemish their heirloom tomatoes as they drive home in the Prius, listening to a podcast of David Sedaris. You can even distinguish their ideologies in their consumption patterns. Liberals drive Land Rovers and Lexuses, while conservatives prefer Pontiacs and Buicks. Liberals drink Sam Adams Light, while conservatives drink Bud. Liberals eat kale salads at Panera, while conservatives eat chicken-fried steaks at Cracker Barrel.

This division between liberal elites and working-class conservatives seems to be reflected in voting patterns as well. For example, who do you think is more likely to have voted for Barack Obama—Earl or David? This division between liberal elites and working-class conservatives poses a big puzzle. As many writers have argued, people seem to vote against their own self-interests. Less well-off conservatives vote for leaders who pass tax cuts that mainly benefit the wealthy while cutting

government benefits that help the poor. One explanation for this paradox, as recounted in Thomas Frank's bestselling book *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, is that a small number of wealthy elites in the Republican Party have duped working-class Americans into voting for policies that favor the rich by riling them up with concerns about "God, guns, and gays." These cultural issues arouse so much anger, the theory goes, that people will vote for economic policies that do not benefit them.

The satirical news site *The Onion* perfectly summed up this sentiment following George W. Bush's reelection in an article headlined "Nation's Poor Win Election for Nation's Rich":

> "The Republican party—the party of industrial mega-capitalists, corporate financiers, power brokers, and the moneyed elite—would like to thank the undereducated rural poor, the struggling blue-collar workers in Middle America, and the God-fearing underprivileged minorities who voted George W. Bush back into office," Karl Rove, senior advisor to Bush, told reporters at a press conference Monday. "You have selflessly sacrificed your well-being and voted against your own economic interest. For this, we humbly thank you." Added Rove: "You have acted beyond the call of duty—or, for that matter, good sense."

The trouble is that this whole account is wrong. It's not only wrong, but it's almost perfectly backward.

It is simply not true that most poor people vote conservative and most rich people vote liberal. Far from it. The fact is that the higher a person's income is, the more likely he is to vote Republican. The richest third of the population votes more Republican than the middle third, who vote more Republican than the bottom third.

Political scientist Andrew Gelman has documented these trends using data from the American National Elections Studies and the National Annenberg Election Survey, as well as from state and national exit polls. These surveys are carried out using painstaking methods to guarantee that they are representative of the American population, and they all tell the same story. Although no income group is monolithic, the trend is clear: The richer you are, the more likely you are to call yourself a Republican and to vote Republican. The poorer you are, the more likely you are to call yourself a Democrat and to vote Democrat.

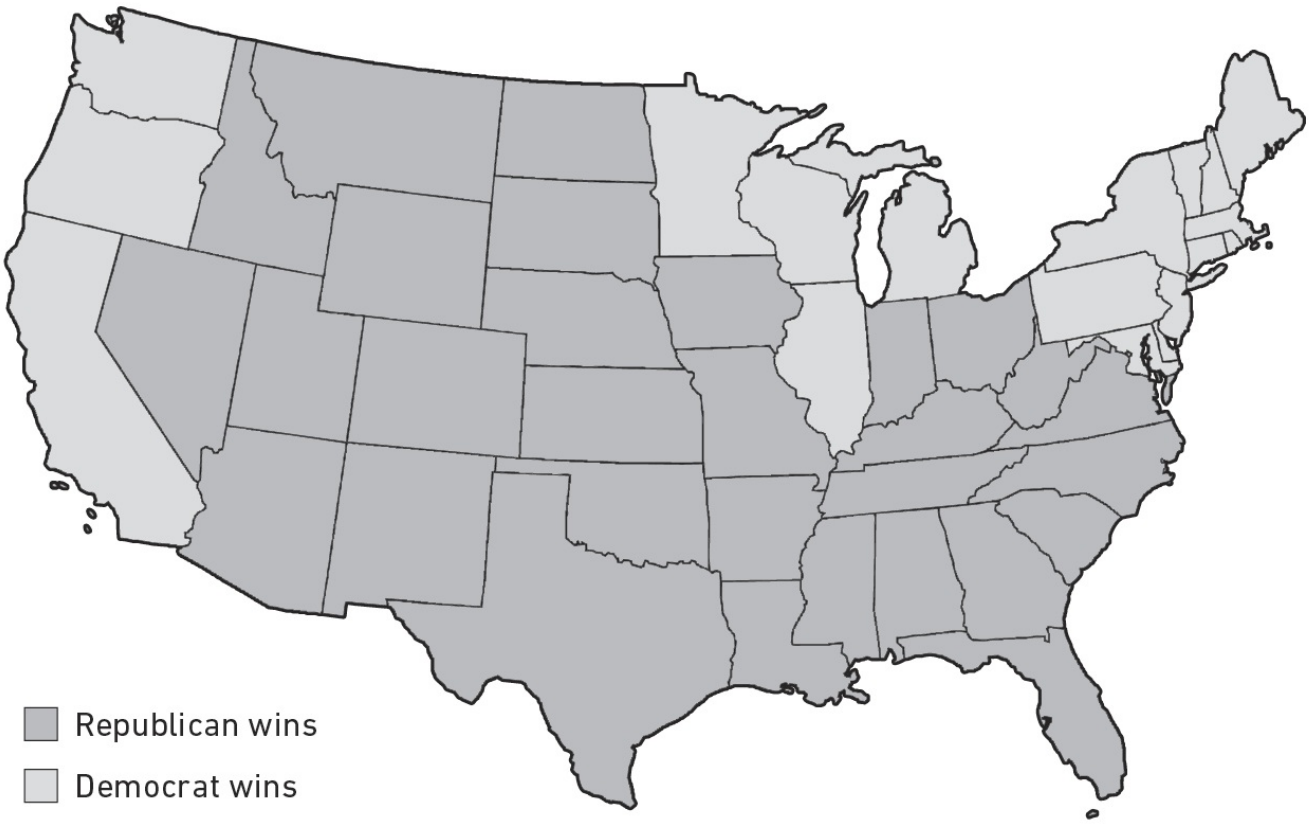

Figure 4.2. Electoral map of the 2004 presidential election. Dark states indicate Republican wins, light states indicate Democrat wins. Adapted from Gelman (2006).

Visit http://bit.ly/2mTrRWS for a larger version of this image.

Consider the electoral map, shown in Figure 4.2, for the 2004 presidential election. Dark states voted for George W. Bush and light states voted for John Kerry. This is one source of our mistaken images of rich and poor voters. We look at affluent coastal states like New York and California and see a population of latte-sipping liberals. We look at the poor red states in the middle of the country and picture them as the home of poor, God-fearing conservatives. But as Gelman points out, these state-level summaries ignore the incomes of the individuals within those states. If we break down the vote tallies by the incomes of the voters, we see an entirely different picture.

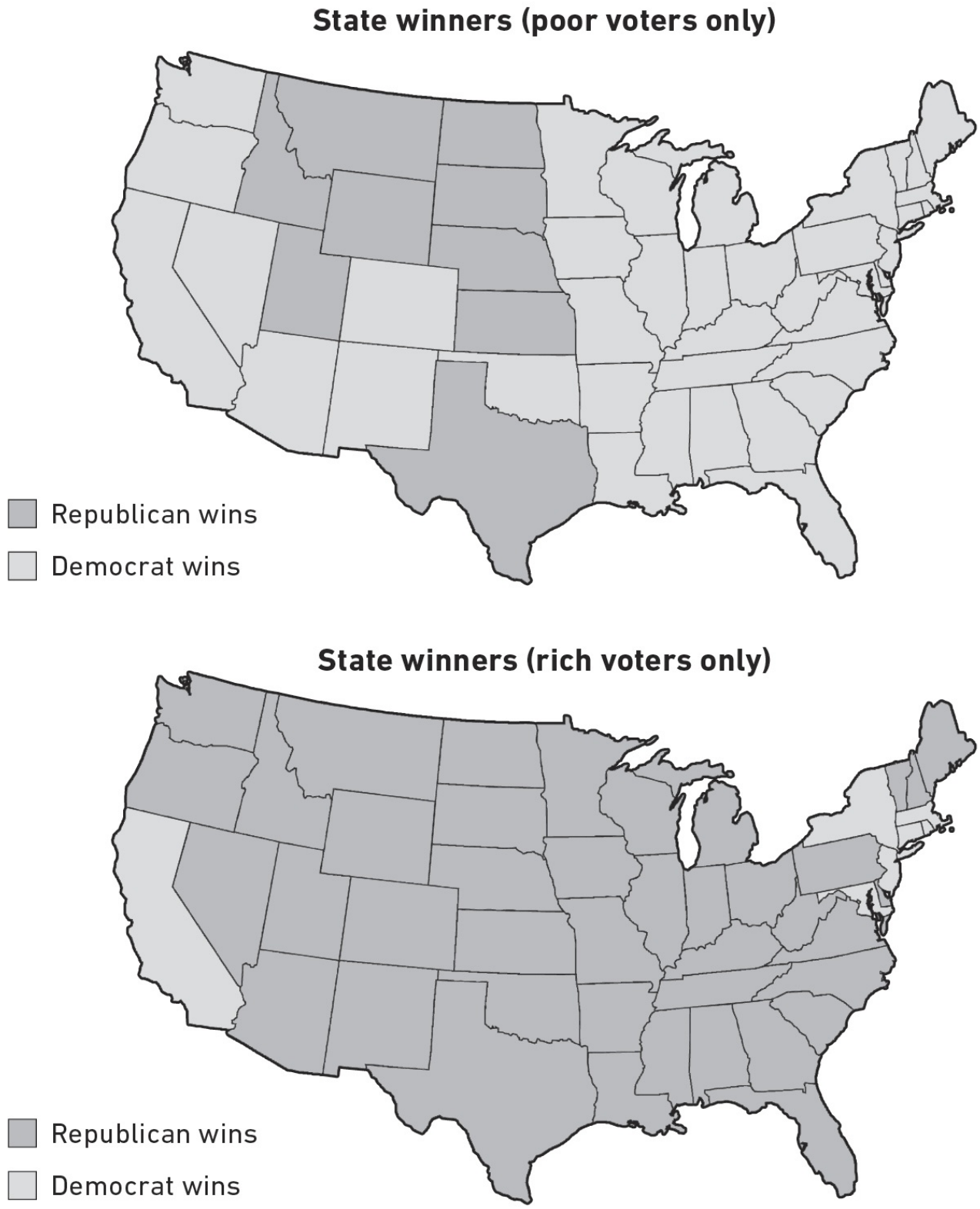

Figure 4.3. What the electoral map of the 2004 presidential election would look like if we counted only the votes of the poor (top) and rich (bottom). Dark states indicate Republican wins, light states indicate Democrat wins. Adapted from Gelman (2006).

Visit http://bit.ly/2oDisPR for a larger version of this image.

The maps in Figure 4.3 show the same electoral map of the 2004 election, redrawn based on the incomes of the voters. The top image shows what the electoral map would look like if we counted only the votes of poor people—a landslide victory for Democrats. The second image shows what the electoral map would look like if we counted only the votes of the rich—a landslide win for the Republicans. Money matters, and in the opposite direction from our stereotypical images of red and blue Americans.

What of the differences in tastes and styles between liberals and conservatives? Political campaign advertisers have spent a lot of time collecting data on the consumer preferences of voters in each party. It turns out that Land Rovers and Lexuses are two of the most Republican cars there are. Land Rover owners, for example, favor the Republican Party over the Democratic Party by about 30 percentage points. Pontiac and Buick owners, in contrast, skew Democratic. You may be surprised to learn that Chevy, Ford, and Volvo are all evenly split.

The stereotypical images of partisan dining habits have been shown to be mistaken, too. Both Cracker Barrel and Panera attract more Republicans than Democrats. Democrats apparently prefer Golden Corral and Dunkin' Donuts (who knew?). We even get the beers wrong. Contrary to popular belief, Republicans love Sam Adams Light and Democrats drink most of the Budweiser. Our latte-sipping, farmers' market–shopping liberals might be horrified to learn that the most Democratic beer of all is Milwaukee's Best. The most Republican beer of all isn't even made in America: It's the Dutch import Amstel Light.

Typecasting consumption patterns based on political affiliation isn't always wrong. Democrats really do buy most of the Priuses, and Republicans really do watch more Fox News. But these expressions of taste are directly related to the political ideologies that matter to members of each party. People choose hybrids because they are concerned about climate change. People tune in to Fox News because it presents the right-wing perspectives they want to hear. As we drift further away from actual political issues, however, our images of liberals and conservatives become flimsier and turn into empty stereotypes that are more likely to mislead us.

As strange as this all sounds to those of us accustomed to standard conceptions of liberal elites and salt-of-the-earth conservatives, the patterns outlined by Gelman make perfect sense to economists and political scientists. Every capitalist economy in the world has some degree of free market competition, as well as some degree of market regulation and taxation. Both exist on a continuum, and no serious thinker on the left or right believes you can entirely eliminate either one. Tax rates close to 100 percent completely stifle motivation and innovation. The collapse of communist systems in the twentieth century is generally seen as evidence that extreme levels of government regulation and taxation cannot compete with free market economies. At

the other extreme, an entirely unregulated market would quickly lead to monopolies, which would defeat the purpose of market competition. Lack of taxation would lead to the deterioration of roads and other infrastructure, as well as military defense.

In the real world, market economies exist in a middle ground between these extremes. Every capitalist country has some form of regulation, some form of taxation, and some form of safety net for those at the bottom. Economic debates between liberals and conservatives are ultimately about pushing the needle a little more in one direction or the other. Conservative policies aim to promote the free market, while liberal ones seek greater taxation to support shared infrastructure and safety net programs.

Economists have argued for decades that rational political choices (rational in the sense of narrowly defined self-interest) depend on how much money you have. When it comes to issues like shared infrastructure, such as roads and military defense, everyone benefits about the same. But safety net programs help the poor more than the rich, so the more money you earn, the more sense it makes to support lower taxes and less redistribution of wealth. The less money you earn, the more incentive you have to support higher taxation and redistribution. In this framework, people seem to conform to economists' image of rational, calculating agents making decisions based on their economic self-interest.

They appear to fit that model, that is, until you assess people's understanding of what is in their self-interest. In one study, researchers surveyed people who were recipients of a variety of government-subsidized benefits. They asked the subjects a simple question: Have you ever used a government social program? Remarkably, nearly half believed that they had not. Forty percent of those receiving Medicare, for example, denied ever obtaining government benefits. The same was claimed by 47 percent of those receiving the Earned Income Tax Credit. More than half of people receiving government-subsidized student loans said they had not taken any government benefits. These subjects weren't lying. Medicare recipients, for example, would acknowledge that they had received Medicare, but they just didn't believe that it had anything to do with the government. Surveys like this suggest that people have almost no idea whether government programs are in their economic self-interest.

Maybe people don't understand the extent of government benefits, but are they aware of whether raising or lowering taxes benefits them? Political scientist Larry Bartels asked how well people know what is in their self-interest when it comes to tax cuts. His answer is best summed up in the title of the article he wrote about his results: "Homer Gets a Tax Cut." Bartels studied the opinions of Americans regarding the tax cuts passed during the George W. Bush administration. These measures had major consequences, amounting to trillions of dollars. Still, when asked whether they favored the cuts, opposed them, or hadn't thought about the issue, 40 percent of

respondents said they hadn't thought about it. When asked factual questions about the cuts and their consequences, most people either didn't know the answers or got them wrong.

Not everybody is a political news junkie, of course, so Bartels tried to determine whether people might have more knowledge about tax cuts if they were more knowledgeable about politics in general. The survey included a seven-question quiz to measure how conversant with the topic the respondents were. The questions were not especially difficult. One, for example, asked what position Dick Cheney held (he was vice president at the time); another asked who Tony Blair was. While knowledge about tax cuts was higher among people who were well informed about politics, unfortunately very few people were in that category. Most subjects got more questions wrong than right. If the questionnaire had been a classroom test, most Americans would have flunked.

How, then, does the average American manage to vote in ways that benefit him economically? One clue comes from the power of feeling poor, as we saw in Chapter 1. That feeling depends not just on one's own wealth but also on how it compares to that of other people, as we saw in Chapter 2. Gelman's research on voting and income provides one clue about the importance of relative comparisons. The tendency for the rich to vote Republican is stronger in poor states than in rich ones. So, if you are a wealthy Mississippian, you are much more likely to vote Republican than if you have the same wealth in New York or Connecticut. Although the reason is not completely understood, I suspect it has to do with the different kinds of relative comparisons people make in rich and poor states. If you earn $200,000 a year in Biloxi, then you likely feel much richer than most people around you. But if you make the same income in Manhattan, you may feel barely middle class.

My colleagues and I suspected that those social comparisons might affect the way people think about political issues more than their actual wealth does. We focused on the kinds of policies that economists argue are most clearly linked to economic self-interest: taxation and redistribution of wealth. To test that idea, we set out to change people's social comparisons to see whether changes in political opinions followed. We asked a group of participants to answer a long computerized survey about their incomes, spending habits, shopping tastes, and even personality traits. We then provided them with computerized feedback. Although the participants thought that the feedback was based on their survey answers, in reality we randomly assigned them to receive one of two kinds of response. The first group was told that they had more money than most other people who were similar to them in their demographics and personality. The other group was told that they had less money than most others who were comparable to them. We then asked both groups a series of questions about their views on political issues, including taxation and redistribution.

As we predicted, participants who felt relatively rich expressed less support for redistribution, while those who were made to feel relatively poor became more supportive. These two groups had the same average income and the same average level of education. All that differed was whether they felt richer or poorer than their peers. Social comparisons led to differences in political beliefs.

This study also suggests that citizens in general do vote in their economic interest despite being mostly ill informed about where that interest really lies. Imagine that people who *feel* better off than average vote to cut taxes and to cut welfare benefits, and those who *feel* poorer than average vote to raise taxes and increase welfare benefits. Since feelings of relative status are (modestly) linked to actual incomes, people will be right about their self-interest more often than they are wrong. The result is that voting patterns that seem random at the individual level approximate patterns of self-interested voting, on average. Like a murmuration of starlings, millions of people looking myopically at where they stand compared with their neighbors can produce a group that seems to move with purpose.

We've seen so far that people tend to vote for policies that they feel are in their self-interest whether they actually are or not. And we've seen that what feels to be in their self-interest depends on how they compare with other people. As the haves and the have-nots grow further apart, we can expect the effects of social comparisons to weigh more and more heavily. Taken together, these observations suggest that the rise in inequality that has occurred over the past few decades might be contributing to increasingly intense partisanship and political conflict.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that politics in America has become more polarized in recent years. The data support that observation. Geoscientist Clio Andris and her colleagues used data analysis techniques developed for mapping geographical distances to map the "distances" between members of different parties in the U.S. House of Representatives based on roll call votes. Whenever two representatives vote the same way, they are drawn closer to each other. When they vote differently, they become further apart. The results are striking.

Figure 4.4 shows the distances between each representative for the Congresses of 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2011. Each House member is represented by a single black dot (Republicans) or gray dot (Democrats). In the 1980s there was a lot of overlap. Many of the gray dots are deep into black territory, and many of the black dots are in gray territory. The border between the two is thin and permeable. With each decade, however, the overlap recedes. By 2011 both sides were almost perfectly sealed off from each other, and the middle ground is a no-man's-land. These visualizations vividly illustrate the polarization that has split political elites over the past four decades. Does inequality contribute to this division?

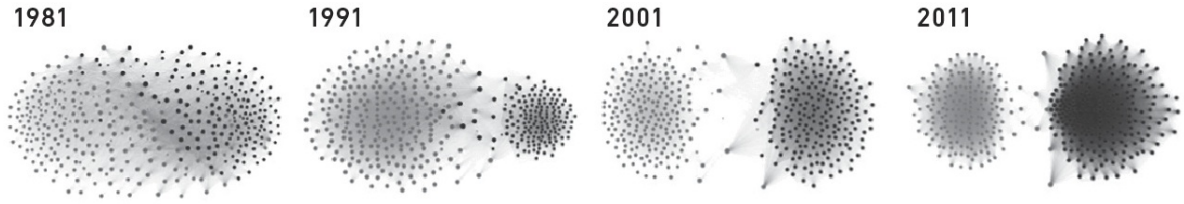

Figure 4.4. Graphical depiction of polarization over time in the U.S. Congress. Adapted from Adris et al., 2015.

To answer that question, we went back to the laboratory. We ran an experiment in which participants were presented with several stocks. The subjects read about each company that issued the stock, its price-to-earnings ratio, and how the stock had performed over the last six months. They then chose how to invest some seed money, provided by the experimenters, in whatever combination of stocks they wanted. They were told that the performance of the securities would be simulated based on real stock market performance from the previous six months, and that they could keep whatever profit they earned from the investments. In reality, everyone made a 30 percent profit on their investments, but half of the participants were told that they did better than 89 percent of other players, while the other half were told that they did worse than 89 percent. In this way, we created differences in relative status, without there being any differences in actual money earned.

A crucial part of this experiment was that it evolved. The current rules, we told participants, had been created by the votes of past players. One rule was that high earners would be taxed 20 percent of their earnings to offset the losses endured by low earners, who would be given a 20 percent bonus. In other words, the game included a redistribution policy. To find out whether relative status would change opinions about redistribution, we then asked the participants to vote on how the rules should change for future generations of players. As we expected based on the role of relative status, the higher-status group wanted to cut taxes and reduce redistribution, and the lower-status group wanted to increase taxes and benefits for future generations of players.

We then presented our subjects with the recommendations of another player who either agreed with them or disagreed with them about the redistribution issue, and asked what they thought of that player. Was the other player competent or incompetent? Was he guided by principle or biased by self-interest? Was he even paying attention to the rules of the game? Was he a rational decision maker or an irrational fool?

As expected, subjects judged the other player to be more incompetent, more biased, and less rational when he disagreed with the subject than when he agreed. When we looked closer at the data, though, we noticed an interesting detail: The perception of the other player as biased and irrational was driven entirely by the group who were told that they did better than their peers. Something about feeling superior in profits made people feel superior to other players about their opinions, too.

We have a tendency to think that people who agree with us are brilliant and insightful, and that those who disagree with us could use a little help in seeing reality for what it is. As George Carlin put it, “Have you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac?” This propensity to believe that we see the world accurately, while anyone who has a different opinion is benighted, fuels conflicts. As psychologist Lee Ross has argued, if I see the world as it is and you disagree with me, then I have only a few possible interpretations of your behavior: You might be incompetent, you might be irrational, or you might be evil. Whatever the case, I can’t reason with you.

If these differences in perception are especially powerful among people who feel rich, then we face some worrying implications as inequality continues to increase. As the minority at the top pull further and further away from the mass of working-class people at the bottom, we can expect their political opinions to change. They will mistake their self-interests for genuine principles, and they will look with disdain on people who disagree with them. If they view their political opponents as incompetent, irrational, or immoral, then they won’t be motivated to compromise.

To determine whether feeling rich really has the potential to influence these beliefs, we ran a final experiment using the investment game. As before, everyone picked stocks, everyone made the same profit, and one group thought they did better than others while the other group thought they did worse. They were again presented with the redistribution recommendations of another player who either agreed or disagreed with them. This time, though, in addition to asking what subjects thought of the other player, we told them that the other player would take part in voting on the rules for the next generation of players, and that his vote would count as much as everyone else’s. One of the rules that they could change, however, was whether every vote should be counted equally.

The results were sobering. The subjects who thought their earnings were inferior wanted to increase redistribution, as before. But they wanted everyone’s vote to count equally, regardless of whether the other player agreed or disagreed with them. The subjects who thought they were superior wanted to reduce redistribution, and they also voted to reject the votes of those who disagreed with them. The more they saw the other player as incompetent and irrational, the less they wanted his vote to count. This research was the first to show that feeling superior in status magnifies our feeling that we see reality as it is while our opponents are deluded. It supports the idea that as the top and the bottom of the social ladder drift further apart, our politics will become more divisive. That is exactly what has happened over the past several decades.

Political scientist Nolan McCarty and his colleagues have also traced political divisions over the last century in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, formulating a measure of polarization based on how lawmakers vote, similar to the

data used for Andris's graphs. The polarization index is at its highest when all Democrats vote one way and all Republicans vote the other. Using this index, they calculated how polarized American politics has been in every Congress since 1947. Figure 4.5 shows that polarization in the House of Representatives and the Gini index of inequality have followed strikingly similar trajectories. Results for the Senate are similar. Both inequality and polarization were relatively low through the 1950s and 1960s. They then began rising in tandem in the mid-1970s and have remained on par ever since.

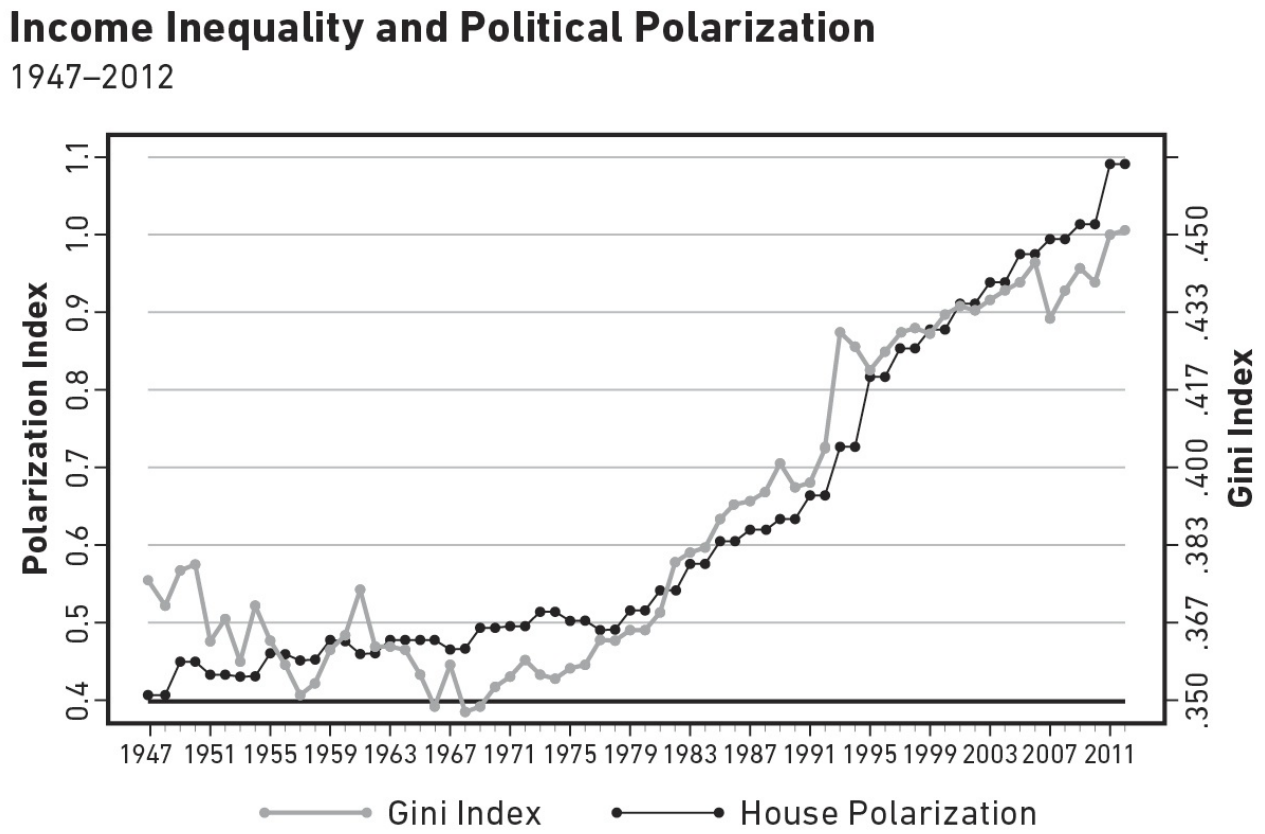

Figure 4.5. The Gini index of inequality and political polarization in the House of Representatives rose in lockstep since the 1970s. From McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal (2016).

Visit http://bit.ly/2odhSM8 for a larger version of this image.

Behavioral experiments and historical data both point to the same conclusion: As our economic worlds diverge, so, too, do our politics. It becomes ever more difficult to see those on the other side of the aisle as well-meaning individuals who share our goals but differ in what they believe are the best means to reach them. Instead, the other side begins to look more and more like enemies.

Leslie Rutledge is the attorney general of Arkansas. When she was elected in 2014, she had to work harder than expected for one vote—her own. Rutledge is a Republican who supported Arkansas's 2013 voter ID law, which requires voters to

show a government-issued ID at polling places. Democrats objected that the law was a thinly disguised effort to prevent poor people and minorities from voting because they are less likely to have valid IDs. Republicans argued that strict standards at the ballot box were important to prevent fraud. Arkansas law also requires citizens to be registered in the state and nowhere else in order to vote. So when the Democratic county clerk, Larry Crane, saw that Rutledge was still registered in Washington, D.C., where she had previously lived, he canceled her voter registration.

Rutledge accused Crane of using "Chicago-style politics" to "disenfranchise" her. Arkansas Democrats enjoyed a few days of schadenfreude and wrote many blog posts about the true meaning of irony.

What do you think were the Arkansas Republicans' true motives in passing the voter ID law? What do you think Crane's real motives were in dropping Rutledge from the voter rolls? Regardless of who you believe was right or wrong in this case, you are likely to be confident that you are assessing the situation with clear eyes, and that anyone who disagrees with you is willfully ignorant at best and malevolent at worst. Polls from the Pew Research Center have revealed that the percentage of ordinary Americans who have a "very unfavorable" opinion of the opposing political party has steadily grown over the last three decades as inequality has increased. In 2014, about a third of respondents thought that members of the opposite party were not just mistaken, but were a threat to the nation's well-being. A third of conservatives and a quarter of liberals said that they would be upset if a family member married someone of the wrong party. These trends are dangerous, because when opponents become enemies, people can justify almost anything in responding to them. After all, how can you expect to reason with idiots and maniacs?