

Shooting Political Polarization

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Abstract:

This paper studies changes in political polarization in the US, in the aftermath of a shock on a politically salient and divisive topic: Guns Right. Specifically, it focuses on the dynamics of polarization among voters and politicians. Relying on the exogenous feature of a mass shooting event (MSE), it implements a difference-in-differences design exploiting variation across places and time. It measures voters polarization using county level voting data, and political polarization analysing the official speeches and the tweets of the US Representatives. Estimates reveal that a MSE triggers a dual and opposite effect: it decreases polarization among voters, but it increases polarization among politicians. Interestingly, these results are not limited to the topic of guns: the ideological distance between Democrats and Republicans in the Parliament increases over a range of different topics not directly linked to guns. Using an event study approach, I show that the rise in political polarization persists for a longer period in some topics more than others. Moreover, the results are heterogenous across Democrats and Republicans congressmen with the latter less likely to speak in the House after a mass shooting event.

Keywords: Political polarization, Text analysis, Social media, Language

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