Partisan polarization is one of the principal features of contemporary US politics. This presentation examines polarization among Democratic and Republican partisans and how much it is supported by their intimate discussion networks across the 1992 to 2012 period and in comparison with other countries. The study draws upon national post-election surveys of the US electorate in 1992, 2004, and 2012 and parallel surveys from additional countries in the Comparative National Election Project (CNEP). Partisan polarization is measured by relative evaluations of the presidential candidates in the U.S. and the party leaders in other democracies. Network partisanship is measured from respondents’ reports of the party favored in the most recent national election by their spouse/partner (where they exist) and two additional personal discussants selected using a “most important matters” name generator. The study finds that the more homogeneously partisan the core network, the more partisan are partisans’ relative candidate evaluations. Partisans’ network homogeneity (homophily) and its relationship to partisan polarized evaluations both have increased in the U.S. between 1992 and 2004-2012, contributing to the growth of partisan polarization in its politics. Compared to other CNEP surveys, not only is there more partisan polarization in the U.S. but also social networks there in recent years are more strongly related to this polarization, even in comparison to some countries which have a recent history of deep political conflict.

Paul Beck is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the Ohio State University. He received his AB, from Indiana University in 1966, his MA in 1968, and PhD in 1971, both from the University of Michigan. Before retiring in June 2012, he was Distinguished Professor of Social and Behavioral Science and Professor of Political Science with courtesy faculty appointments in the School of Communication and Department of Sociology at Ohio State. From 2004 to 2008, he was Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Ohio State; from 1991 to 2004, he was Chair of its Department of Political Science. Before coming to Ohio State in 1987, he was a professor at Florida State University, where he was department chair from 1981-1987, and the University of Pittsburgh from 1970-1979.

His research and teaching interests are focused on political parties, voting behavior, and public opinion in the U.S. and abroad. His current research, initially funded by the National Science Foundation, focuses on the mass media, interpersonal discussion networks, and secondary organizations as sources of information for voters in modern democracies, including the United States. He was co-principal investigator of national U.S. surveys of the 1992, 2004, and 2012 electorates. These surveys have contributed to the Comparative National Election Project (CNEP), which he co-founded and co-directs, bringing voter behavior in the U.S. into comparison with over 30 other democracies. Currently, Beck is co-editing a book from the CNEP project, which includes a chapter he has co-authored and will be published by Routledge in 2015. He also is conducting studies of partisan polarization in the US and discussion networks cross-nationally. His many articles have appeared in leading journals such as the American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, British Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, Party Politics, and the Public Opinion Quarterly. He is author of multiple editions of Party Politics in America (1988, 1992, 1997, 2001) and co-editor of Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies (1984).

Beck was honored by the Ohio State University in 2004 as a Distinguished Scholar and in 2000 for Distinguished University Service. He received the American Political Science Association’s Goodnow Award for distinguished service to the profession and its Eldersveld Award for lifetime professional contributions to the field of political organizations and parties. His commentaries on American politics are featured regularly in American and foreign media and in community talks.