

The Decline and Rise of Party Polarization in Congress during the 20th Century

Keith T. Poole
University of California, San Diego

In 1984 Howard Rosenthal and I published a paper in the *Journal of Politics* titled “The Polarization of American Politics.”¹ We found that beginning in the mid-1970s, American politics became much more divisive. More Democrats staked out consistently liberal positions, and more Republicans supported wholly conservative ones. The primary evidence in that study, which focused exclusively on the Senate, were ratings issued by interest groups such as the Americans for Democratic Action and the United States Chamber of Commerce.²

These early findings motivated Rosenthal and I to develop a better measurement of legislative ideology. Interest group ratings are in fact nothing other than aggregations of legislator roll call voting decisions. We realized that much better information would be available by scaling the individual roll call votes directly. To do this, we adapted the standard dichotomous logit (or probit) model and developed our NOMINATE (*Nominal Three-step Estimation*) procedure. A dynamic version of this procedure – D-NOMINATE – enabled us to analyze all the roll call votes in the first 100 Congresses. In *Congress: A Political Economic History of Roll Call Voting*, we confirmed our earlier analyses and found that the polarization surge had continued unabated through the 100th Congress (1987-88). It has continued through 2004.³

Our NOMINATE procedure is based on a simple geometric (spatial) model of voting behavior. Each legislator is represented by one point and each roll call is represented by two points – one for “Yea” and one for “Nay”. These points form a *spatial map* that summarizes the roll calls. In this sense a spatial map is much like a road map. A spreadsheet that tabulates all the distances between every pair of sizable cities in the United States contains the same information as the corresponding map of the U.S. but the spreadsheet gives you no idea what the U.S. looks like.⁴ Much like a road map, a spatial map formed from roll calls gives us a way of visualizing the political world of a legislature. The closeness of two legislators on the map shows how similar their voting records are, and the distribution of legislators shows what the dimensions are.

The number of dimensions needed to represent the points is usually small, because legislators typically decide how to vote on the basis of their positions on a small number of underlying evaluative or *basic* dimensions. For example, in recent U.S. Congresses, we can easily predict how a “liberal” or a “conservative” will vote on most issues. These basic dimensions structure the roll call votes and are captured by the spatial maps.

For most of American history only two dimensions are required to account for the fourteen million choices of the twelve thousand members who served in Congress. In fact, one dimension suffices except in two periods, roughly 1829-1851 and 1937-1970, when race-related issues introduced a second dimension. The two brief periods where the spatial model fails are the Era of Good Feelings, when there was a one party system, and the 32nd Congress (1851-53), when the Compromise of 1850 unraveled. In these periods, there is a poor fit, even when 10 or more dimensions are used. Voting is chaotic.

The first dimension typically divides the two major parties on the fundamental issue of the role of government in the economy. The second dimension differentiates the members by region mainly over race and civil rights but in the latter part of the 19th Century it picked up regional differences on bimetallism and the free coinage of silver. In the modern era the primary dimension is liberal-moderate-conservative as it is commonly understood and the second dimension captured the conflict over race and civil rights.

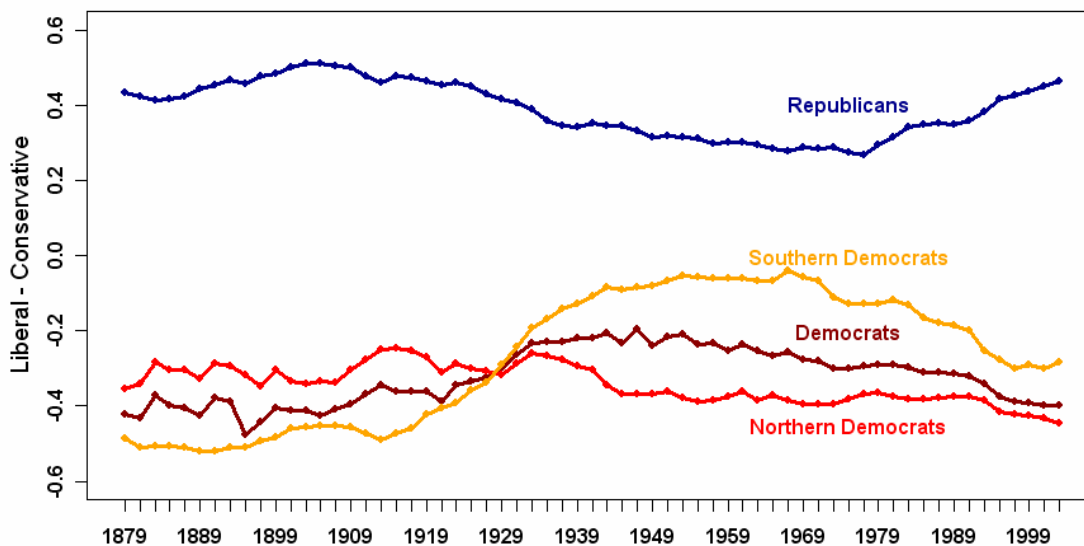
The political party system of the 1940s and 1950s emerged during the latter part of the New Deal when, in the wake of the 1936 elections, northern Democrats heavily outnumbered southern Democrats in Congress.⁵ Many of the programs initiated during the subsequent Second New Deal were not to the liking of the South. Voting on minimum wages in 1937 and 1938 followed by voting during World War II on the poll tax and voting rights in the armed forces helped to split the Democratic Party into two distinct regional wings.⁶ Voting in Congress became two dimensional in order to differentiate northerners from southerners on civil rights and related votes.

With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1967 Open Housing Act, this second dimension slowly declined in importance and is now almost totally absent. Race related issues – affirmative action, welfare, Medicaid, subsidized housing, etc. – are now questions of *redistribution*. Voting on race related issues now largely takes place along the liberal-conservative dimension and the old split in the Democratic Party between North and South has largely disappeared. Voting in Congress is now almost purely one-dimensional – a single dimension accounts for about

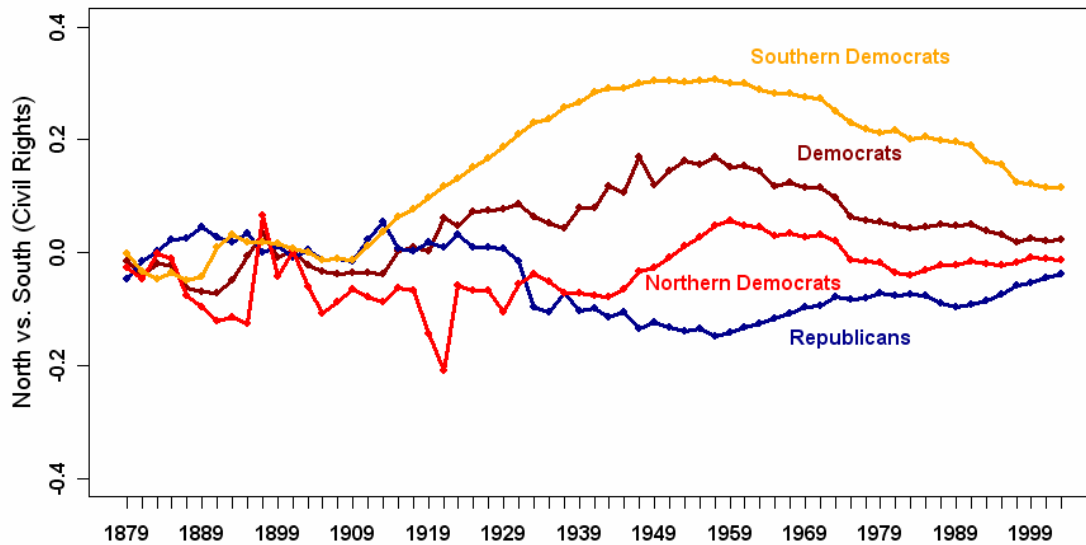
93 percent of roll call voting choices in the 108th House and Senate – and the two parties are increasingly polarized.

Figures 1 and 2 show the average positions of Democratic and Republican legislators in the House of Representatives from the end of Reconstruction through the 108th Congress (1879 – 2004) on the liberal-conservative and regional dimensions.⁷ The most notable features are: (1) the long rightward drift on the first dimension of the southern Democrats after World War I, followed by a reverse movement to the left that began in the late 1960s; (2) the slow drift leftward of the Republicans on the first dimension beginning in the early 1900s with a turn back to right beginning in the early 1970s; and (3) the emergence of a significant second dimension related to Civil Rights that split the northern and southern Democrats from the late 1930s onward.

**Figure 1: House 1879-2003
Party Means on Liberal-Conservative Dimension**



**Figure 2: House 1879-2003
Party Means on Regional (Civil Rights) Dimension**



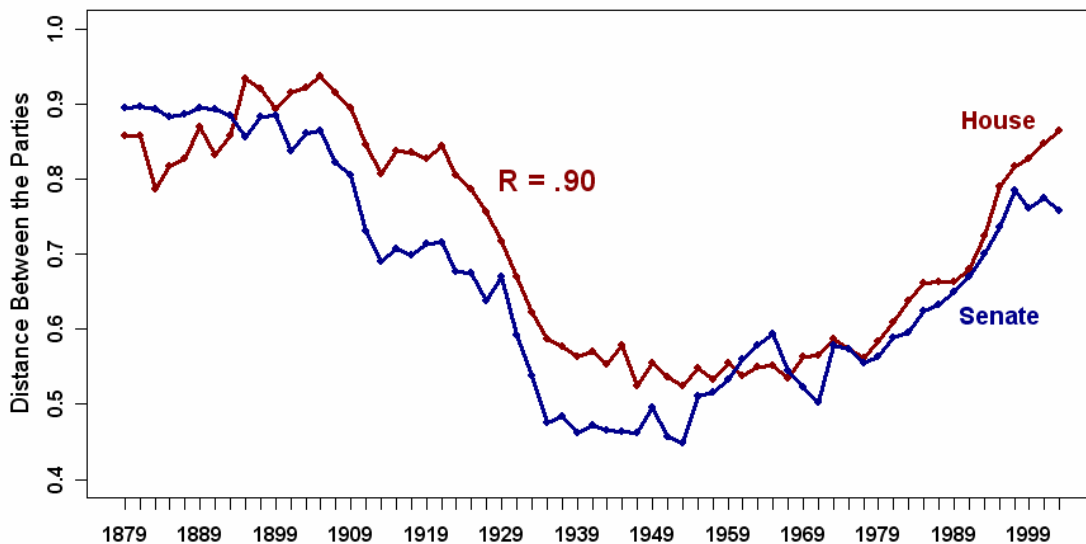
The rapid decline in the importance of the second dimension reflects the realignment of the South towards the Republican Party.⁸ During the past 30 years Republicans have moved steadily to the right on the liberal-conservative dimension with conservatives replacing more moderate Republicans outside the southern states and conservatives replacing moderate and conservative Democrats in the South. The effect has been a right-ward movement on the liberal-conservative dimension of the Republican Party as a whole. As a result the number of southern Democrats declined and as a group they became much more liberal.

The means of the two parties on the second dimension have drawn closer together reflecting the declining importance of region in accounting for roll call voting in Congresses since the 1980s. The regional differences within the Democratic Party have almost completely disappeared. These trends have continued through the 108th Congress in both the House and the Senate.⁹

The forces driving these changes in the party means over time are the same for both chambers. The correlation between the House and Senate Republican first dimension means is .935 and for the Democrats the correlation is .838.¹⁰ Despite the institutional differences in the method of election and the length of term served, the basic forces driving American politics affect the two chambers equally over time.

Figure 3 shows the difference between the Democrat and Republican Party means for the post-Reconstruction period. Polarization as measured by the distance between the two major party means declined in both chambers from roughly the beginning of the 20th Century until World War II. It was then fairly stable until the mid 1970s and has been increasing steadily over the past 30 years. The polarization trend is essentially the same in both chambers. The correlation between the two series is .90 echoing the point above about the basic political forces affecting the two chambers equally.

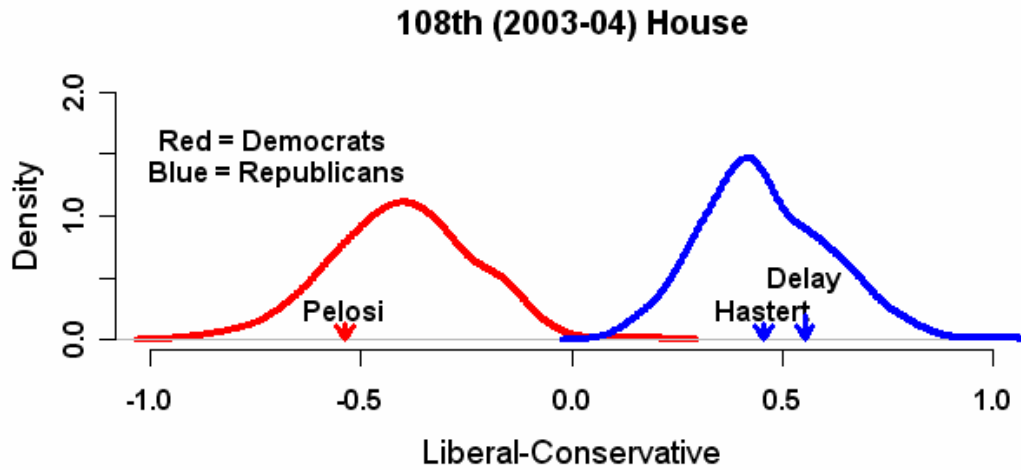
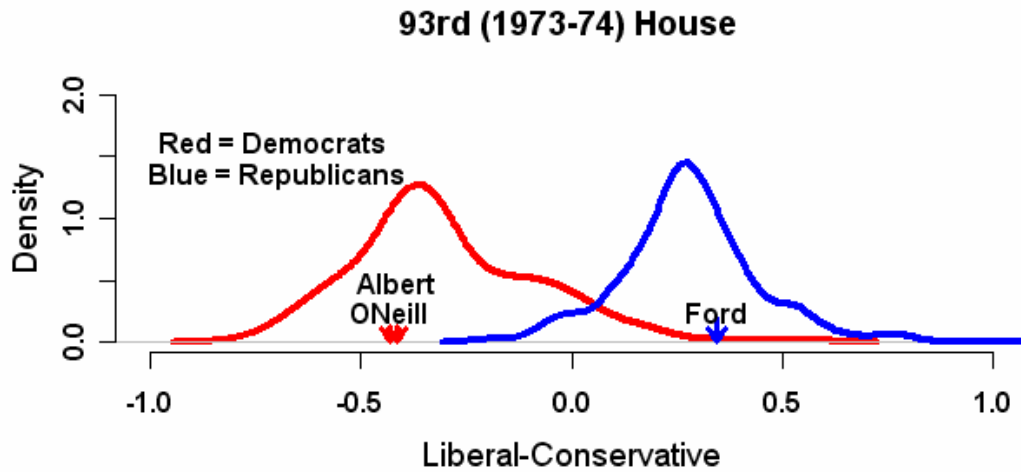
**Figure 3: Party Polarization 1879-2003
Distance Between the Parties First Dimension**



Our original D-NOMINATE estimation ended with the 99th Congress. Interestingly, Congresses 100-108 (1987 – 2004), if anything, mark an *acceleration* of the trend – especially in the House. Note, however, that the acceleration is smooth and does not show a particular jump in polarization induced by the large Republican freshman class elected in 1994.

In the Senate polarization peaked in the 105th Congress and has stayed relatively flat through the 108th (1997 – 2004). Whether or not we have finally reached the peak of the modern polarization trend remains to be seen. Perhaps the center will hold. Certainly the agreement by the “Gang of Fourteen” to forestall the “nuclear option” in the Senate gives some hope that maybe over the next decade polarization may finally plateau and start to decline.

However, the fly in the ointment is the House which shows no sign of any moderating. Figure 4 shows simple smoothed histograms of the two parties on the liberal-conservative dimension for the 93rd (1973-74) and 108th (2003-04) Houses. The positions of the Speaker, Majority leader, and Minority leader are indicated in both plots.



Moderates have virtually disappeared during the 30 years between the 93rd and 108th Congresses and the parties have pulled apart. In the early 1970s there was considerable overlap of the two political parties. In the past ten years that overlap has almost completely disappeared. In addition to the pulling apart of the two parties, the Republican Party is now skewed to the right with a sizable bulge in its right flank. In contrast, the old right flank of the Democratic party composed mostly of southerners is now gone. Consistent with the graph of the party means shown in Figure 1, the distribution of the *northern* Democrats in the 108th is essentially the same as it was in the

93rd. To reiterate the point I made earlier, the basic dynamic driving polarization have been the changes in the Republican Party. Republicans have moved steadily to the right on the liberal-conservative dimension with conservatives replacing more moderate Republicans outside the southern states and conservatives replacing moderate and conservative Democrats in the South.

The trend to polarization is reflected in the leaders then and now. Nancy Pelosi and Tom DeLay are more extreme and far less bi-partisan than Tip O’Neill and Gerald Ford were thirty years ago. In terms of the 93rd House, Pelosi and DeLay are located at the far left and far right sides of their respective parties.

Conclusion

The beginning of the modern trend to greater polarization began with the break down of the three party system in the 1970s. For almost 50 years the United States had a three political party system (late 1930s to early 1980s). In Congress all three parties easily formed coalitions with one of the others against the third depending on the issue at hand. The northern and southern Democrats united to organize the House and Senate and thereby seize the spoils due the “majority” party. The northern Democrats and Republicans united to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the “conservative coalition” of Republicans and southern Democrats united to block liberal economic (and in the 1970s, social) policies.

The demise of this system began with the assassination of President Kennedy. President Johnson was able to do what Kennedy was unable to do – push fundamental civil rights legislation through Congress. This was followed by President Johnson’s 1964 landslide victory over an “extremist” Barry Goldwater that produced a liberal northern

Democratic Congressional majority for the first time since 1936. This destabilized the Democratic coalition. Democrats in the 89th Congress no longer required southern support to pass many of the expansive federal programs that are so much a part of our current political debate. These programs along with other redistributive programs initiated by the federal courts – mandatory school busing being the most conspicuous – led to a polarizing backlash¹¹ in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The effects of this backlash were blunted by Watergate and the Republican Party did not fully recover its footing until the 1980 elections.

The old southern Democratic Party has, in effect, disintegrated, and with it the disappearance of the second dimension of congressional voting. Race has been drawn into the first dimension because race-related issues are increasingly questions of redistribution. The end result is that the Democrat and Republican parties have become more homogeneous and are now deeply polarized. The moderates are gone and we are left with a polarized, unidimensional Congress.

Endnotes

¹ See Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, “The Polarization of American Politics.” *Journal of Politics*, December 1984, 1061-1079.

² A larger set of interest group data were analyzed in Keith T. Poole, “Least Squares Metric, Unidimensional Scaling of Multivariate Linear Models.” *Psychometrika*, 55, 1990, 123-149. The results confirm our 1984 analysis.

³ See Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press); Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "D-NOMINATE After 10 Years: An Update to *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting*." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 26:5-29, 2001; Keith T. Poole, *Spatial Models of Parliamentary Voting* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2005; Nolan M. McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), forthcoming, April 2006.

⁴ I borrowed this analogy from Jordan Ellenberg, who used it in an article about our political polarization research. See Jordan Ellenberg, “Growing Apart: The Mathematical Evidence for Congress' Growing Polarization.” *Slate*, December 26, 2001.

⁵ We use the *Congressional Quarterly* definition of South – the eleven states of the Confederacy plus Kentucky and Oklahoma.

⁶ See Poole and Rosenthal, 1997, chapter 5.

⁷ For Congresses 46 – 99 (1879 – 1986) the patterns are essentially the same as those shown in Poole and Rosenthal (1997, p. 62-63, Fig. 4.3, 4.4).

⁸ See Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 1989; Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006.

⁹ Graphs of party means for the Senate are very similar to those for the House shown in Figures 1 and 2.

¹⁰ The correlation of the two chamber means was .772. As Rosenthal and I noted in *Congress* (p. 63), cross-chamber differences are affected by party ratios within the respective chambers and these tend to lower the correlation between the chamber means.

¹¹ The reasons for this polarization are discussed in Kevin B. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co.), 1969; and Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc.), 1970.