Picture of a Polarized Congress

The deadlock between Republicans and Democrats is verified by a graphical mapping technique and analyzed by one of the method's scholar-inventors.

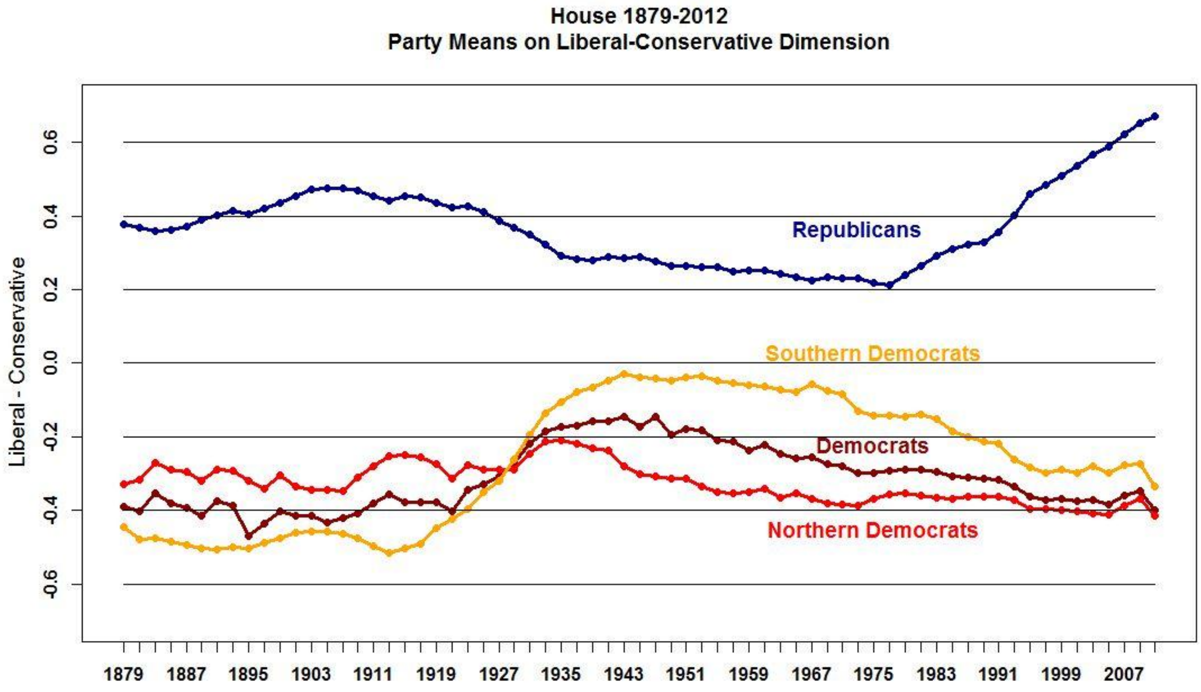
By Keith Poole

Even the most casual of political observers have noticed that American politics has grown more divisive, charged, and dysfunctional in recent years. The political parties seem to have become ever more distant from one another, with few national political leaders staking out the middle ground. Commentators use the term "polarization" to describe this phenomenon. But can political polarization—defined, say, as the distance between Democrats and Republicans in Congress—actually be measured? The answer is yes, and our results illustrate the full extent to which polarization is now part of the American political zeitgeist.

Thirty years ago, Howard Rosenthal and I developed a statistical procedure ("NOMINATE") that estimates the ideological positions of members of Congress based on their voting records. NOMINATE places legislators who rarely vote together—for example, liberal Senator John Kerry (D-MA) and conservative Senator Rand Paul (R-KY)—far apart, while members who have similar voting records are placed close to one another. The underlying logic is similar to that used to produce a road map from a set of distances between cities. Much like a road map, a spatial map based on roll-call votes provides a way of visualizing the political character of a legislature.

In this case, though, the "map" represents not "north-south" or "east-west" but rather two ideological dimensions. The first dimension represents the familiar "liberal-conservative" spectrum, which reflects the two major parties' division on the fundamental role of government in the economy. The second dimension separates legislators by region, mainly over issues involving race and civil rights. In the modern era, most congressional voting is explained by legislators' positions along the liberal-conservative scale, so we focus on this dimension in our analysis of political polarization.

What we find is that, since the mid-1970s, Democrats and Republicans in Congress have continued to move away from the ideological center and toward their respective liberal and conservative poles. This trend can be seen in the accompanying graph, which shows the mean score of the Democratic and Republican parties on the liberal-conservative dimension in the House since the end of Reconstruction (the Senate graph is very similar). NOMINATE scores (shown on the vertical axis) range from -1 (most liberal) to +1 (most conservative), with a 0 score representing the midpoint of the extremes (the most ideologically moderate position). Because the Democratic Party was split into North and South throughout much of this period, the means of both wings are shown separately on the graph, which also depicts the party as a whole.



Two important trends are evident in the graph. First, while both parties have become more ideologically polarized in the last 40 years, congressional Republicans have moved further to the right than Democrats to the left during this period; moderate-to-liberal “gypsy moth” or “Rockefeller” Republicans have virtually disappeared from

Congress. Second, because the mean ideological position of Northern Democrats has changed very little in the modern era, most of the change among congressional Democrats can be attributed to the loss of moderate-to-conservative Southern Democrats. (Most recently, after the 2010 midterm elections, the ranks of white Southern Democratic Representatives were cut by more than half.)

The result is that the parties are now ideologically homogenous and distant from one another. With almost no true moderates left in the House of Representatives, and just a handful remaining in the Senate, bipartisan agreements to fix the budgetary problems of the country are now almost impossible to reach.

During Ronald Reagan’s administration, about half of the members of Congress could be described as moderates. Reagan was thus able to forge major bipartisan agreements to cut taxes in 1981, raise taxes in 1982, fix Social Security (the Greenspan Commission) in 1983, and pass immigration reform (which included amnesty) and major tax simplification in 1986. But now, in contrast to the Reagan years, both parties have become increasingly paralyzed by their activist bases (the “true believers”), putting much-needed reform in our tax, entitlement, and education systems out of reach.

Given that trends in polarization have continued unabated for decades and appear to be related to underlying structural economic and social factors—income inequality, cultural conflict, and “hot button” issues such as abortion, for example—it is unlikely that this deadlock will be broken anytime soon.

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