

# The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics

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*Political elites of the United States are deeply polarized. Polarization of the Democratic and Republican Parties is higher than at any time since the end of the Civil War. This essay describes how the modern polarization trend emerged and its implications for mass political behavior and public policy outcomes. We contend that contemporary political polarization must be understood in terms of both the ideological divergence of the parties and the expansion of the liberal–conservative dimension of conflict to a wider set of social and cultural conflicts in American society. We close with the speculation that the Republican Party has become the more fractured of the parties along the liberal–conservative dimension at both the elite and mass level.*  
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Even the most casual observer of American politics cannot help but notice that partisan conflict has grown sharper, unrelenting, and more ideological over recent decades. Pundits and ordinary citizens alike wistfully recall a bygone (though not that distant) era when DC politicians from opposite sides of the aisle could come together to have a drink, share a joke, and even occasionally pass major pieces of legislation.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary American politics seems to be not only more fiercely contested, but also fought over a wider range of issues—from traditional battles over the size and scope of government intervention in the economy to social/cultural battles over abortion, contraception, gay marriage, religious liberty, immigration, and gun control. These ideological divides also seem to align more closely with partisan divisions as the ranks of conservative

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1. See, for instance, Chris Matthew's column, "What Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill Could Teach Washington Today," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/17/AR2011011703299.html>, accessed on June 5, 2014.

Democrats and liberal Republicans have diminished in both Congress and the electorate.<sup>2</sup>

In order to assess the nature and extent of polarization in contemporary American politics, we require some method for the measurement of ideology. Measurement is crucial to the task of studying polarization, as our inferences are entirely reliant on the values we assign to a latent quantity such as ideology. For instance, questions like whether one legislator is more conservative than another or whether a legislator has become more liberal over time depend solely on how we measure those legislators' ideological positions. As Jacoby writes, "Science and measurement are closely intertwined with each other. In any discipline, scientific progress is strictly limited by the capacity to measure relevant concepts."<sup>3</sup> The importance of measurement becomes immensely clear in a context like the study of political polarization.

In this essay, we apply the NOMINATE statistical procedure to measure the ideological positions of Members of Congress (MCs) and document the dramatic increase in political polarization in the United States since the 1970s. NOMINATE (for Nominal Three-Step Estimation) is an unfolding method<sup>4</sup> based on the spatial theory of voting that jointly estimates the positions of legislators and policy outcomes in latent ideological space from observed roll call voting behavior.<sup>5</sup> The recovered dimensions correspond to ideological divisions within Congress and legislators' scores on these dimensions provide empirical measures of their ideological positions. NOMINATE also provides information about the policy content of those dimensions. This is important because, as we discuss, polarization relates not only to the ideological distance between partisans, but also to the number and scope of issues being contested.

The appeal of using NOMINATE to study the phenomenon of political polarization is that NOMINATE uses legislators' entire roll call voting records to estimate their ideological locations, rather than just a subset of selected votes, as with interest group ratings. Moreover, the specific DW-NOMINATE (for dynamic, weighted NOMINATE) procedure that we employ uses overlapping cohorts of legislators to "bridge" between legislators who have not served together, thus allowing ideological scores to be compared over time.<sup>6</sup> This allows us to make explicit comparisons of the ideological positions of, for example, a freshman

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2. Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

3. William G. Jacoby, "Levels of Measurement and Political Research: An Optimistic View," *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (January 1999): 271–301, at 271.

4. Clyde H. Coombs, *A Theory of Data* (New York: Wiley, 1964).

5. Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

6. Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Income Redistribution and the Realignment of American Politics* (Washington DC: AEI Press, 1997).

Senator with a Senator who last served in the 1960s. These sorts of comparisons are necessary for the study of a dynamic trend like polarization.

The results from DW-NOMINATE indicate that the level of polarization in Congress is now the highest since the end of the Civil War and shows no sign that it will abate. Alternative measures of legislative ideology, like Adam Bonica's application of campaign contribution data and Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty's analysis of roll call voting in state legislatures, support the claim that American politics has grown more polarized over recent decades.<sup>7</sup> Before discussing these measures of polarization, we first briefly review some important characteristics of the political party system that evolved from the British colonial era and have implications for the sources of contemporary polarization.

## Polarization in the American Party System

Four traditions—representative democracy, plurality elections, geographic-based representation (the tradition of the representative living with those he represented), and private property rights—were established from the beginning of the British colonies and shaped much of what was to follow in American political history. They also have important consequences for why and how polarization (and de-polarization) takes place in American politics.

Representative democracy and capitalism in North America evolved together in an environment of almost unlimited natural resources. Private property rights and representative democracy have cooperatively cohabitated since the earliest British colonial settlements and no real European style socialist party ever gained a lasting foothold in the United States. This is what Louis Hartz called the "Liberal Tradition in America."<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, the American political space has long been bracketed on the left.

In addition, because of the nature of the earliest settlements, geography-based representation in representative assemblies became the norm. The sharp break with British tradition was that legislators lived in the district/town that they represented, rather than being assigned by a political party to represent a district. As the political parties were active throughout the United States, regional interests were incorporated within the parties, and that tended to dampen conflict between the parties. For example, before the Civil War, Southern Whigs and Southern

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7. Adam Bonica, "Ideology and Interests in the Political Marketplace," *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (April 2013): 245–60; Adam Bonica, "Mapping the Ideological Marketplace," *American Journal of Political Science* 58 (April 2014): 367–86; Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty, "The Ideological Mapping of American Legislatures," *American Political Science Review* 105 (August 2011): 530–51.

8. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955). See also Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Press, 1948).

Democrats shared an interest in representing the economic concerns of the South, which was based primarily on exporting commodities (namely, cotton, rice, naval stores, and indigo) against the high tariffs often demanded by the nascent manufacturing sectors of the North.

Finally, the adoption of a non-proportional representation electoral system—in line with Duverger's Law—constrained the American political system to two dominant parties.<sup>9</sup> These electoral characteristics, coupled with the emergence of mass-based political parties in the 1820s and the colonial legacy of private property rights, formed the basis of the American political-economic system that has survived into the twenty-first century.

The interaction between these factors helps to explain the periods of polarization and de-polarization in American political history. First, the non-proportional electoral system coupled with the norm that representatives live in their districts tended to produce two political parties whose members represented a diverse set of regional interests. This means that the parties were usually internally divided by regional, non-ideological concerns. The primary division between the two parties almost always centered around economic regulation, taxes, tariffs and so on. Regional interests cut across these traditional left versus right divisions, thereby dampening down the conflict between the parties. Further dampening this conflict between the two parties was the powerful norm of private property rights. This limited the extent of the division between the two parties on the primary economic dimension, because never in American history has private property rights been seriously challenged. Polarization has proved to be greatest when conflict between the two parties becomes unidimensional—that is, either when secondary, non-economic divisions within the parties overtake economic matters to become the primary focus of conflict or when those divisions essentially disappear. The former occurred in the 1850s around the issue of slavery and the result was the Civil War. The latter occurred to some extent after the Civil War up to the 1930s, and then when the regional division (this time oriented around civil rights) re-emerged during the mid-twentieth century.

The persistent liberal-conservative dimension dividing the parties over the fundamental issue of the role of government in the economy is also the first or primary dimension recovered by NOMINATE. Legislators' positions on this dimension indicate their relative levels of liberalism or conservatism. The second dimension recovered by NOMINATE differentiates the members by region mainly over race and civil rights, but in the latter part of the nineteenth century it picked up regional differences on bimetallism and the free coinage of silver. The second dimension need not necessarily represent regional variation in Congress, but it has done so for virtually the entirety of American history. NOMINATE simply tries to

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9. Maurice Duverger, *Les Partis Politiques* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1951).

explain the most variation in roll call voting with the spatial model of voting, and the greatest source of variation next to the liberal-conservative divide is usually attributable to regional differences among MCs. The estimation of additional dimensions beyond two provides a minimal improvement in fit, but these dimensions do not represent clear, interpretable policy divides that persist over time. It is more likely that additional dimensions are simply fitting noise in the form of voting errors in the same way that including irrelevant variables in a regression models nonetheless improves the  $R^2$  statistics.

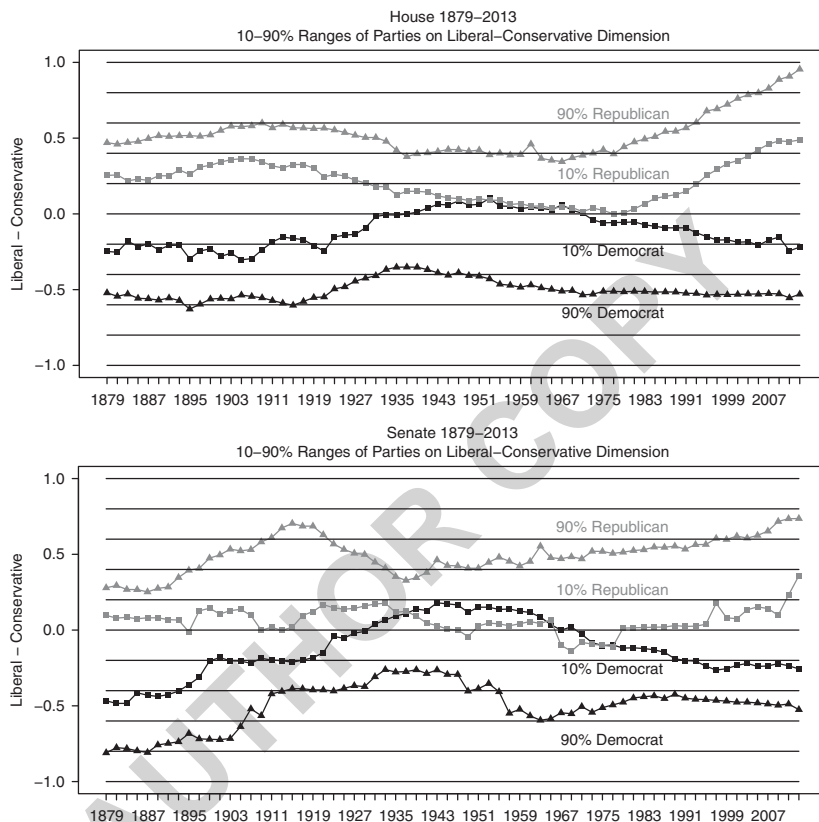
Beginning in the mid-1970s, the parties in Congress began to move further apart on the liberal-conservative dimension. More Democrats staked out consistently liberal positions, and more Republicans supported wholly conservative ones. In other words, Congress began to polarize. Figure 1 shows the dispersion of the parties along the liberal-conservative dimension between the end of Reconstruction (1879) and 2013 by plotting the 10th and the 90th percentile first-dimension DW-NOMINATE scores in each party. That is, 10 percent of Democrats will have higher (more moderate) scores than the 10th percentile score and 10 percent of Democrats will have lower (more liberal) scores than the 90th percentile score. Eighty percent of Democrats will have scores within this range. As can be seen, the parties began to diverge in the mid-1970s and this trend has continued unabated into the most recent Congress. Certainly, there had been some polarizing trends before the 1970s; namely, Democrats began moving left in response to the Great Depression under Presidential Franklin Roosevelt. However, this leftward drift had stabilized by the end of Presidential Lyndon Johnson's second term. By this point, the Democratic Party largely shifted from proposing new social welfare programs to defending existing ones. However, since the mid-1970s, polarization has steadily increased as the ideological center has hollowed out and the outer edges of the parties—especially the Republican Party—have moved ever further toward the ideological poles. Whether we gauge congressional polarization by the difference of party means, the difference between the parties' 10th percentile scores, or any number of alternative measures, Congress is now more polarized than at any time since the end of the Civil War.

The roots of the modern trend to greater polarization can in part be found in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Southern Whites began voting for Republican candidates as the process of issue evolution over race played out.<sup>10</sup> Southern Republicans first gained a strong foothold in presidential elections, then in elections for the U.S. Senate and House, and finally most of the southern state legislatures became dominated by

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10. Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

**Figure 1**  
*Ideological Dispersion of the Parties in Congress*



Note: Figure shows the DW-NOMINATE ideological scores of the 10th/90th percentile Democratic and Republican legislators in the House and Senate over time.

Republicans. The old southern Democratic Party has, in effect, disintegrated. The exodus of conservative Southerners from the Democratic Party at both the elite and mass levels has created a more homogenous liberal party. The net effect of these changes is that race—once a regional, second-dimension issue—has been drawn into the liberal–conservative dimension because race-related issues are increasingly questions of redistribution.<sup>11</sup>

11. Poole and Rosenthal, *Congress*.

However, the southern realignment does not fully account for the increase in polarization. The Republican Party became much more conservative across all regions of the United States. The 1964 Goldwater presidential primary campaign was a key turning point.<sup>12</sup> The Goldwater insurgency created a national cadre of activists like Newt Gingrich who slowly shifted the Republican Party to the right across the whole country.

The steady growth in income inequality and changes in immigration trends in the United States over the last half century also have implications for political polarization.<sup>13</sup> Poorer citizens routinely exhibit lower levels of political participation, and the influx of immigrants who are low-income workers and/or non-citizens has further increased the proportion of non-voters at the bottom end of the income distribution. In effect, this has shifted the position of the median income voter upward along the income distribution and, thus, the active electorate is less supportive than the mass public of government spending on redistributive social welfare policies.<sup>14</sup> This helps explain how the Republican Party has been able to move steadily rightward over the last 40 years without major electoral consequences, whereas Democrats have not been able to move further left than where the party was in the 1960s.

Finally, as we show in the following section, social/cultural issues are increasingly being drawn into the main dimension of conflict, which has usually been nearly exclusively occupied by economic issues. The end result is that the Democratic and Republican parties have become more ideologically homogeneous and are now deeply polarized. Moderates in Congress have virtually disappeared during the past 40 years, as the parties have pulled apart.

Adam Bonica's use of campaign contribution data to develop ideological estimates (called CF scores) of MCs has also shown that the parties have become ideologically polarized since the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the difference of party means on the liberal-conservative dimension that are estimated from DW-NOMINATE and Bonica's CF scores are correlated at  $r=0.91$  between 1980 and 2012.<sup>16</sup> Bonica's CF scores, in addition to providing an external validity check, also provide some insight into how polarization is sustained and exacerbated, by showing that donors themselves are a deeply polarized group. Small donors—who comprise a large

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12. Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

13. Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913–1998," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118 (February 2003): 1–39.

14. Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

15. Bonica, "Ideology and Interest"; Bonica, "Mapping the Ideological Marketplace."

16. Bonica, "Mapping the Ideological Marketplace."

proportion of campaign receipts in competitive congressional districts—are particularly ideologically extreme.<sup>17</sup>

## Heightened Ideological Constraint and the Changing Conflict Space of American Politics

One of the underappreciated aspects of contemporary political polarization has been how a diverse set of policy conflicts—from abortion to gun control to immigration—has collapsed into the dominant economic liberal–conservative dimension of American politics. That is, not only have the parties moved further apart on this ideological dimension in recent decades, but the meaning of the dimension itself has changed as it now encompasses a wider range of issues. The phenomenon has been termed “conflict extension” by Geoffrey Layman and Tom Carsey, and its occurrence among party activists and strong partisans in the electorate has been thoroughly documented by Layman *et al.*<sup>18</sup> In this section, we examine the progression of conflict extension in Congress and show that several formerly cross-cutting (i.e., issues that divide the parties internally) issues have been absorbed into the primary liberal–conservative dimension as polarization has expanded.

Of course, the notion that there are now fewer socially or culturally conservative Democrats as well as socially or culturally liberal Republicans in Congress is hardly controversial and probably obvious to any casual observer of contemporary American politics. However, we can more methodologically trace the evolution of “conflict extension” since the 1970s in Congress by examining the over-time fit of roll call votes on non-economic issues to one- and two-dimensional spatial models of ideology estimated by the DW-NOMINATE procedure.

Roll call votes that strongly tap into the primary liberal–conservative divide among legislators represent issues that are good fits to a one-dimensional model. That is, we can correctly classify most legislators’ vote choices using only their positions on the first (liberal–conservative) dimension. Roll call votes that correspond to cross-cutting divisions are, of course, not picked up by the dominant

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17. James G. Gimpel, Frances E. Lee, and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz, “The Check is in the Mail: Interdistrict Funding Flows in Congressional Elections,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (April 2008): 373–94; Adam Bonica, Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, “Why Hasn’t Democracy Slowed Rising Inequality?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27 (Summer 2013): 103–24.

18. Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey, “Party Polarization and ‘Conflict Extension’ in the American Electorate,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (October 2002): 786–802; Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey, “Party Polarization and Party Structuring of Policy Attitudes: A Comparison of Three NES Panel Studies,” *Political Behavior* 24 (September 2002): 199–236; Thomas M. Carsey and Geoffrey C. Layman, “Changing Sides or Changing Minds? Party Identification and Policy Preferences in the American Electorate,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (April 2006): 464–77; Geoffrey C. Layman, Thomas M. Carsey, John C. Green, Richard Herrera, and Rosalyn Cooperman, “Activists and Conflict Extension in American Party Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 104 (May 2010): 324–46.



liberal–conservative dimension and are poor fits in one dimension. However, the addition of a second dimension greatly improves the fit of these issues to the model. Finally, roll call votes with non-ideological voting patterns are poor fits in both models. An example of a vote with a good one-dimensional fit would be the 2010/2011 votes on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act; an example of a vote with a poor one-dimensional fit but a good two-dimensional fit would be the 1964 vote on the Civil Rights Act (before race became absorbed into the first liberal–conservative dimension); and an example of a vote with a poor fit in both models would be the 2008 votes on the \$700b financial industry bailout package (TARP).<sup>19</sup>

Below we measure the over-time fits of congressional roll call voting on four social/cultural issues—abortion, gay rights, gun control, and immigration—for NOMINATE scores calculated in one and two dimensions. For the analysis on each roll call vote, the Proportional Reduction in Error (PRE) statistic measures the model’s improvement in classification over a null model in which all choices are classified at the modal (i.e., majority) category. This accounts for the fact that, for example, a correct classification of 80 percent of roll call votes would be a greater improvement for a 51–49 vote than it would be for a 79–21 vote (since 79 votes could be correctly classified by simply classifying everyone as a Yea (the modal category) vote). The measure of the overall fit of the model is the Aggregate Proportional Reduction in Error (APRE) statistics. APRE simply aggregates the PRE values of multiple roll call votes indexed by  $j$  ( $j = 1, \dots, q$ ):

$$\text{APRE} = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^q \{\text{Minority Vote} - \text{Classification Errors}\}_j}{\sum_{j=1}^q \text{Minority Vote}_j}$$

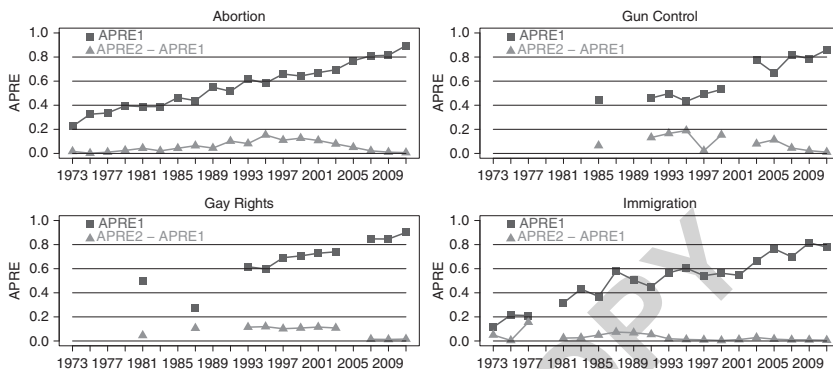
APRE ranges between 0 and 1: a value of 0 indicates that the model provides no improvement in classification beyond placing all votes in the modal (majority) category, and an APRE value of 1 indicates the model perfectly classifies all choices (i.e., 0 classification errors). We calculate APRE values for roll call votes concerning each of these issues in the 93rd through 112th Houses (covering the period from 1973 to 2013), when at least three issue-relevant roll call votes were conducted. This means that APRE values are missing for Congresses in which there were an insufficient number of roll calls on the issues, but on these issues this problem is not severe enough to be troublesome.

The findings are presented in Figure 2. APRE1 is the APRE value from the one-dimensional model, while APRE2 – APRE1 measures how much improvement in

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19. Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Political Bubbles: Financial Crises and the Failure of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

**Figure 2**  
*Spatial Fit of House Roll Call Votes on Selected Issues*



*Note:* Figure shows the spatial fit of selected issues to a one-dimensional model of ideology (APRE1) and the difference between their fit to a two-dimensional ideological model and a one-dimensional ideological model (APRE2 - APRE1).

classification the two-dimensional model provides over the one-dimensional model. Across all four issues, we see a dramatic improvement in fit to the one-dimensional model (i.e., along the liberal-conservative dimension) between the 1970s and the present. The APRE1 values for roll call votes on these four issues all exceeded 0.76 in the 112th House, whereas in the 1980s these issues generally had one-dimensional fits in the 0.3–0.5 range, and as recently as the 1990s, abortion votes had APRE values centered around 0.6 and gun control votes had APRE values centered around 0.5. These results provide strong evidence for the rapid growth in ideological constraint between economic, social, and cultural issues among MCs during the last 40 years.

Interestingly, the addition of a second dimension does not provide much of a boost in model fit on these issues during this period. On abortion, gay rights, and gun control votes, the second dimension improves classification most during the 1990s and early 2000s, but even in this period the APRE2 - APRE1 values never exceed 0.2. The contribution of the second dimension to model fit for roll call voting on immigration jumps during the mid-to-late 1980s, but the role of the second dimension has evaporated for all four of the issues in recent Congresses, as these issues have been absorbed into the expanding liberal-conservative divide between the parties.

At the mass level, there is less evidence that issue attitudes have collapsed onto a single liberal-conservative dimension, as has been the case for political elites. However, this claim needs to be tempered: politically informed and

engaged citizens exhibit greater ideological constraint, and this group as well as wealthier citizens and strong partisans have grown more constrained in their issue attitudes since the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> In other words, these types of citizens are more likely to express uniformly liberal or conservative positions on a wide range of issues. Of course, this environment has made it more difficult for ideological moderates and cross-pressured citizens (i.e., socially liberal and economically conservative) to gain representation, and there has been some evidence that both groups have become less likely (relative to ideologically consistent citizens) to be politically active.<sup>21</sup>

Elite-level polarization has also produced greater recognition of ideological differences between the parties, which in turn has facilitated partisan sorting.<sup>22</sup> However, partisan sorting is only one type of sorting that has been induced by political polarization. Geographic sorting has also increased as Republicans and conservatives have become more likely to emigrate to “red” districts and Democrats and liberals to “blue” districts, a process that is facilitated by the confluence of cultural and political orientations in contemporary America.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, there has been a considerable amount of sorting in the electorate based on religious and value divides as well.<sup>24</sup> The fact that these cleavages align with income differences between the parties in the electorate suggests that the greatest influence of elite polarization on voters may not be to polarize attitudes *per se*, but to divide or sort mass partisans along a diverse set of salient cleavages.

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20. James A. Stimson, “Belief Systems: Constraint, Complexity, and the 1972 Election,” *American Journal of Political Science* 19 (August 1975): 393–417; Thomas R. Palfrey and Keith T. Poole, “The Relationship between Information, Ideology, and Voting Behavior,” *American Journal of Political Science* 31 (August 1987): 511–30; Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Is Polarization a Myth?” *Journal of Politics* 70 (April 2008): 542–55; Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman, “Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion,” *American Journal of Sociology* 114 (September 2008): 408–46.

21. Edward G. Carmines, Michael J. Ensley, and Michael W. Wagner, “Issue Preferences, Civic Engagement, and the Transformation of American Politics,” in *Facing the Challenge of Democracy: Explorations in the Analysis of Public Opinion and Political Participation*, ed. Paul M. Sniderman and Benjamin Highton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 329–54.

22. Martin Gilens, Lynn Vavreck, and Martin Cohen, “The Mass Media and the Public’s Assessments of Presidential Candidates, 1952–2000,” *Journal of Politics* 69 (November 2007): 1160–75; Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*.

23. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Ian McDonald, “Migration and Sorting in the American Electorate: Evidence from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study,” *American Politics Research* 39 (May 2011): 512–33; Wendy K. Tam Cho, James G. Gimpel, and Iris S. Hui, “Voter Migration and the Geographic Sorting of the American Electorate,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103 (July 2013): 856–70.

24. Geoffrey C. Layman and Edward G. Carmines, “Cultural Conflict in American Politics: Religious Traditionalism, Postmaterialism, and U.S. Political Behavior,” *Journal of Politics* 59 (August 1997): 751–77; William G. Jacoby, “Individual Value Structures and Personal Political Orientations: Determining the Direction of Influence,” Paper presented at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

## Discussion

Both components of contemporary political polarization—the growing distance between the parties on the liberal–conservative spectrum and the redefinition of the liberal–conservative dimension itself to encompass a wider set of social and cultural conflicts—have profound implications for American politics. Issues such as abortion and gay marriage tap into fundamental worldview divides, inject added passion into partisan conflict, and make compromise between the two sides more difficult.<sup>25</sup> That this cleavage reinforces an already-widening schism between the parties over questions of economic regulation and redistribution further hampers the ability of the political system to address problems such as regulation of the finance industry, balancing the federal budget, and addressing income inequality.<sup>26</sup>

One of the consequences of polarization has been the movement of policy outcomes away from the ideological center and greater oscillation in policy outcomes between left and right when party control of Congress changes. Figure 3 illustrates both patterns by showing the mean first-dimension (liberal–conservative) DW-NOMINATE score of the House and the Senate overall and of the winning coalitions in each chamber between 1879 and 2013. In other words, Figure 3 summarizes the ideological position of the policy outputs of each chamber over time. In both the House and Senate, the chamber means are more stable and closer to the center than the winning coalition means. However, the divergence between the two is largest in polarized eras; namely, the late nineteenth/early twentieth century and roughly the last 25 years. Note, for example, that the winning coalition means closely track the chamber mean during the 1950s–1970s. This reflects the large number of moderates in each party and the frequency with which winning bipartisan coalitions were formed; hence, legislation needed to appeal to centrist members to win passage. This is not true during periods of ideological polarization when party unity is higher and winning coalitions are built with a majority of the majority party. As one example, Medicare passed the House in 1965 with the support of 237 Democrats and 70 Republicans, while President Obama’s health-care reform package passed the House in 2010 without a single Republican vote and despite defections from 34 of the more moderate members of the Democratic caucus.

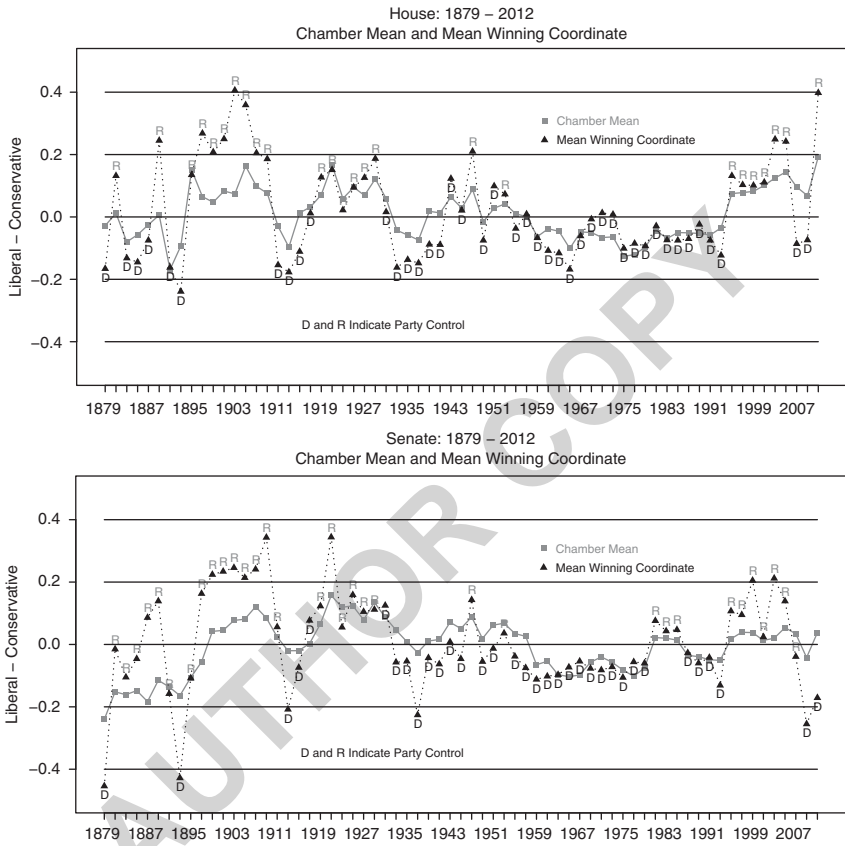
Some proposed reforms to address gridlock, such as the elimination of the filibuster in the Senate, would greatly exacerbate the fluctuation of policy outcomes by eliminating the need to attract Senators in the minority party in order to enact legislation. The combination of a majoritarian Senate with a polarized party

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25. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

26. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, *Polarized America*; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, *Political Bubbles*.

**Figure 3**  
*Fluctuation in Congressional Policy Outcomes*

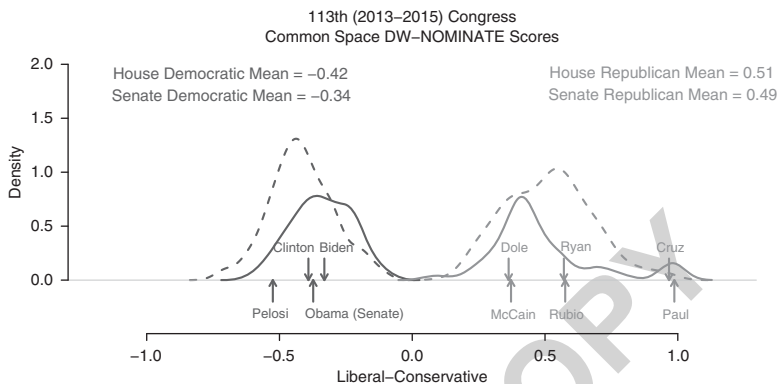


Note: Figure shows the mean DW-NOMINATE ideological scores of the overall chamber and winning coalitions in the House and Senate over time.

system would produce a Westminster-style Congress, with non-centrist policy outcomes and wider policy swings between transitions of party control. While this would promote a responsible two-party system by more closely tying parties to public policies, it would also create a more unpredictable policy environment that would almost certainly hamper economic growth.<sup>27</sup>

27. Alberto Alesina, Sule Özler, Nouriel Roubini, and Phillip Swagel, "Political Instability and Economic Growth," *Journal of Economic Growth* 1 (June 1996): 189-211. See also Arend Lijphart,

**Figure 4**  
*Ideological Positions of the Parties in the 113th Congress*



*Note:* The House is shown with dotted lines, the Senate with solid lines. Democrats are shown in dark gray, Republicans in light gray.

Of course, a strong regularity of the American two-party system is that because parties are coalitions of diverse and sometimes competing interests, internal cleavages routinely arise within one or both of the parties. In most cases, these are simply minor stresses that create some intra-party conflict, but at times they can “break” the parties and lead to a realignment. Over the last half century, Democrats have been the more fractured of the two parties with an uneasy marriage of the New Left with the New Deal coalition of unions, the white working class, Southern Democrats, and racial minorities.

However, we speculate that the Republicans will be the more fractured of the two parties moving forward. Republicans in Congress have moved further to the right than Democrats have to the left over the last 40 years and the Republican Party now covers greater territory along the right side of the ideological spectrum. That is, contemporary Republicans appear to be primarily divided not over a new issue or regional concerns, but on the degree of their conservatism.<sup>28</sup>

*Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) for a discussion of the negative economic effects of policy swings between nationalization and de-nationalization of the British steel industry.

28. Of course, a similar ideological divide could appear in the Democratic Party between the left and center, most likely over economic issues like income inequality and financial regulation. However, at present there is no evidence from NOMINATE of such a divide among congressional Democrats.

We find evidence in support of this claim at both the elite and mass level. Figure 4 shows the distribution of Democrats and Republicans in the 113th Congress along the first (liberal–conservative) dimension recovered by the DW-NOMINATE Common Space procedure.<sup>29</sup> In both chambers, Republicans are further away from the center and have wider variances than the Democrats ( $F=1.83$ ,  $p<0.01$  in the 113th House,  $F=3.33$ ,  $p<0.01$  in the 113th Senate). It is difficult to identify distinct ideological clusters of Democratic MCs, but it is easy to do so for Republicans; for instance, moderate-conservatives like Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and former Senator Robert Dole (R-KS), solid conservatives like Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI), and very conservative Republicans with close ties to the Tea Party movement like Senators Rand Paul (R-KY) and Ted Cruz (R-TX). With the possible (though non-trivial) exception of foreign policy and domestic surveillance issues, these groups hold conservative positions over a range of economic and social/cultural issues.<sup>30</sup> The differences seem to lie primarily in the *degree* of conservatism—for instance, if and how much they would like to cut from entitlement programs and the federal budget to achieve deficit reduction.

We see a similar cleavage among Republicans in the electorate, as well. The Pew Research Center's January 2013 Political Survey includes several measures that we think are useful to examine this divide among Republican Party identifiers and leaners.<sup>31</sup> Namely, the survey asks for attitudes toward the Tea Party (Agree, Disagree, or No Opinion) and whether respondents prefer elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with or elected officials who stick to their positions. Demographic information and the makeup of issue attitudes are provided for both Republican subsets in Table 1.

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29. Common Space scores allow for comparisons between the chambers as well as across time by using two sets of overlapping cohorts: legislators who have served in both the House and Senate to bridge across the chambers as well as legislators who have served in multiple Congresses to bridge across time. This allows us to include density plots for the parties in both the House and the Senate as well as compare the position of a former legislator like Senator Robert Dole (R-KS) with the positions of MCs in the 113th Congress.

30. If the most conservative group of congressional Republicans were breaking from other Republicans on new issue dimensions, we would expect that their fit to the existing spatial model would be poorer. However, the correlation between first-dimension DW-NOMINATE Common Space score and Geometric Mean Probability (a measure of fit of legislators' observed choices to the spatial model) is  $r=0.20$  among House Republicans and  $r=0.37$  among Senate Republicans in the 112th Congress and  $r=0.05$  among House Republicans and  $r=0.06$  among Senate Republicans in the 113th Congress. Hence, there is at most a weak relationship between ideological extremity and spatial fit among Republican MCs in the last two Congresses, and to the extent a relationship does exist, it is positive (meaning more conservative legislators are a better fit to the model).

31. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *January 2013 Political Survey*, available for download at: <http://www.people-press.org/2013/01/13/january-2013-political-survey/>, accessed on June 5, 2014.

**Table 1**  
*Attitudes and Demographic Characteristics of Republicans in the Electorate*

	<b>Agree Tea party (N = 247)</b>	<b>Disagree Tea party (N = 71)</b>	<b>No opinion Tea party (N = 299)</b>	<b>Stick to positions (N = 331)</b>	<b>Compromise (N = 262)</b>
Agree with Tea Party (%)				86	64
Prefer politicians who compromise to those who stick to positions (%)	35	66	46		
The Federal Government is a major threat to personal rights and freedoms (%)	66	44	38	55	40
Angry with the Federal Government (%)	44	28	21	36	23
<b>Demographics</b>					
Income > \$75k (%)	41	39	27	32	38
Age (median)	56	54	52	54	53
White (%)	93	89	83	84	88
Born again (%)	50	47	48	57	38
Attend religious services at least weekly (%)	51	49	46	51	44



**Ideology**

Self-Placement on 5-point scale (mean)	4.02	3.43	3.59	3.84	3.61
Rating of Republican Party on 5-point scale (mean)	3.45	3.86	3.51	3.70	3.41
Very conservative (%)	26	4	10	19	11
Conservative (%)	54	44	48	54	46

**Issues**

Overtum <i>Roe v. Wade</i> (%)	51	46	40	53	38
Abortion is not that important compared with other issues (%)	43	43	51	45	61
Favor ban on semi-automatic weapons (%)	38	48	56	43	61
Favor ban on high-capacity ammunition clips (%)	40	63	54	44	71
Dealing with moral breakdown should be a top priority (%)	55	41	52	51	51
Smoking Marijuana morally wrong (%)	48	35	48	52	39
Reducing the deficit should be a top priority (%)	96	81	75	84	85

Source: Pew Research Center, January 2013 Political Survey (Republican identifiers and Republican leaners only).

As we would expect, there is considerable overlap between the Tea Party and preferred type of elected official: 86 percent of respondents who prefer elected officials who stick to their positions agree with the Tea Party, and only 35 percent of those who agree with the Tea Party prefer elected officials who compromise (compared with the 66 percent of respondents who disagree with the Tea Party who prefer elected officials who compromise). This schism also corresponds to both economic and social conservatism, with Republicans who agree with the Tea Party and favor sticking to one's position over compromising, rating themselves as more conservative on a 5-point ideological scale, supporting restrictions on abortion, opposing gun control measures at higher rates, and—in particular—displaying greater levels of distrust toward the federal government and concern about the scope of federal power.<sup>32</sup> This bundle of issue positions aligns with the present liberal–conservative dimension; it is simply further to the right than most of the Republican Party. In the electorate as well as in Congress, then, there appear to be greater internal stresses within the Republican Party between the ideological center and right. It remains to be seen if and how these stresses will be resolved.

## Conclusion

The study of political polarization is contingent on the measurement of political actors' ideological positions. Poole and Rosenthal's NOMINATE procedure provides a method to estimate ideological scores for MCs that is based on the spatial model of voting and uses legislators' entire voting histories. Crucially, these scores are dynamic and allow for the comparisons of quantities of interest (like the mean score of the Democratic and Republican parties) across time. The application of NOMINATE to the study of polarization in contemporary American politics produces unambiguous and important results: the Democratic and Republican parties in Congress are more polarized than at any time since the end of Reconstruction, and a single liberal–conservative dimension explains the vast majority of legislators' vote choices, including on a wide array of social/cultural issues. We are now firmly entrenched in a political era that is characterized by the ubiquity of unidimensional, polarized political conflict.

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32. See also Gary C. Jacobson, "The President, the Tea Party, and Voting Behavior in 2010: Insights from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study." Paper presented at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, WA.

*of ideology in the American electorate and is supervised by Keith T. Poole, and is co-author of the book Analyzing Spatial Models of Choice and Judgment with R. The author may be reached at chare@uga.edu*

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