

Political Science 17.20

Introduction to American Politics

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Polarization and Extremism

Lecture 22 (May 2, 2013)

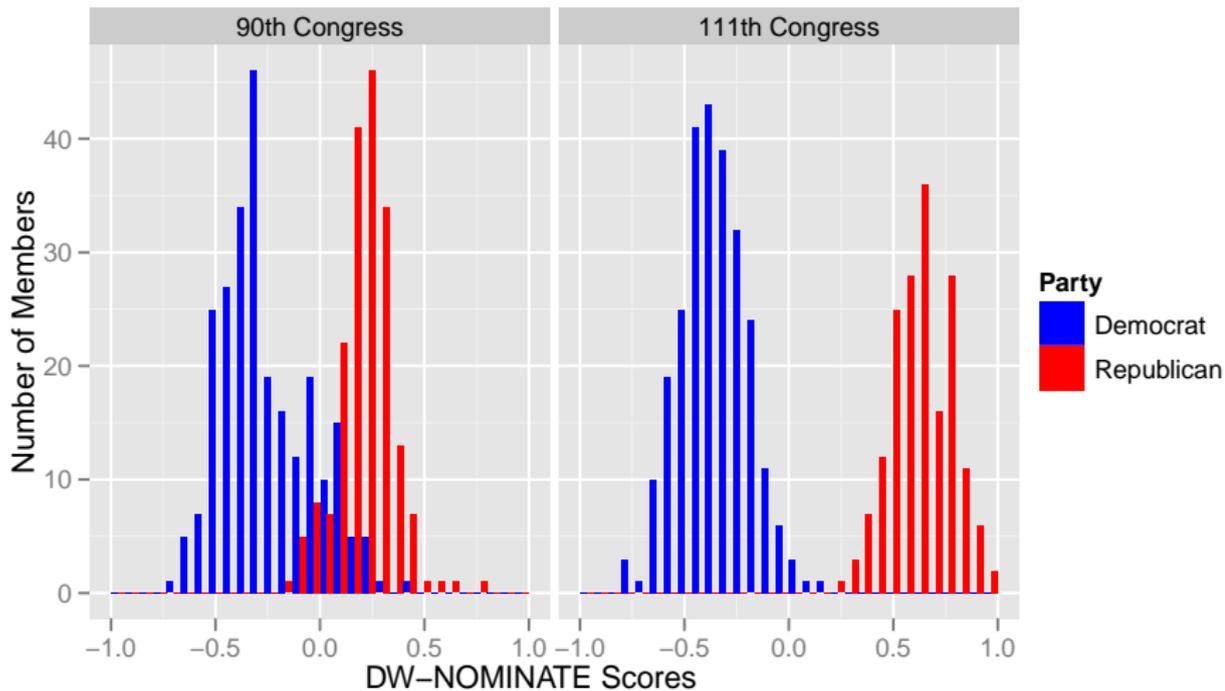
1 Polarization

2 Government by Polarized Parties

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Polarization in Congress: 1966 vs. 2008



Timeline of Congressional Polarization

1) Realignment of the “Solid South” (1960s–1990s):

Civil and voting **rights for Southern blacks**



Conservative Southern **whites leave** Democratic Party



Moderate Southern Democrats in Congress
replaced by **conservative Republicans**

Timeline of Congressional Polarization

2) Party and Congressional Reforms (1960s–1980s):

Decline of machines, institution of **primaries**, rise of **issue-oriented** “amateur Democrats”



Empowered (Democratic) **majority-party** caucus & leadership, weakened (bipartisan) committee system



Conditional Party Government: Homogenous majority party gives leadership more power, which enforces more party unity

Timeline of Congressional Polarization

3) Republican Reaction and Ascendancy (1980s–2010s):

Combative conservative **Newt Gingrich** replaces deal-making moderate George Michel as Republican House leader



Rise of routine minority **obstructionism** and automatic filibuster



After 40 years in minority, **Republicans capture Congress** in 1994 and institute further party-strengthening reforms



Party-aligned interest groups (e.g., Club for Growth, Tea Party) target “Republicans in Name Only” (RINOs) in **primaries**

Mass Sorting

- **Jacobson:** Elites polarized first, then citizens followed.
- **Fiorina:** No, citizens have **sorted** themselves ideologically but remain much more **moderate** than elites.
 - “**Leapfrog representation**”
 - Preference for divided government
- But are voters moderate, or do they just. . .
 - Not care → answer randomly
 - Lack information → answer ignorantly
 - Lack constraint → inconsistent across issues
 - Misapply ideological labels → “conflicted conservatives”
- This is an active scholarly debate—we will revisit it later.

1 Polarization

2 Government by Polarized Parties

Responsible Party Government

For an advocate of **responsible party government**, partisan polarization may look pretty good:

- Party platforms offer clear policy choices to voters
- Disciplined, unified parties
- Incentives for individuals to act collectively

Irresponsible Party Government

- The problem is that we have parliamentary-style **polarized** parties in a **separation-of-powers** constitutional system
 - Divided government
 - Supermajority requirements
- Although both parties act collectively, neither is fully responsible for policy outcomes.
- **Few benefits to compromise**, especially if not from president's party, but potential **large costs** (primary challenge) → gridlock
- As a result, we have **irresponsible party government**.

Which Party Is to Blame?

- **Short Answer:** Both parties are to blame.
- **Longer Answer:** Although both parties have become more ideologically unified and obstructionist, polarization has been **asymmetric**. Congressional Democrats remain more ideologically diverse than Republicans, and there is no real equivalent to the Tea Party or birthers on the Democratic side.

Relative to What?

Making cardinal comparisons across time or context is very dicey—requires assumptions about reference points and what is held fixed when “bridging.”

What **assumptions** do each of these comparisons make?

- “Elites are more polarized than citizens.”
- “The media has a liberal bias.”
- “Republicans have become more conservative.”

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