# The Electoral Roots of America's Dysfunctional Government

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*Since the 2010 midterm election, a combination of ideologically polarized parties and divided government has resulted in gridlock in Washington. Neither party can implement its own policy agenda, but bipartisan compromise appears to be almost impossible to achieve. In this article, I present evidence that the deep ideological divide between the parties in Washington is itself rooted in divisions that have been developing in American society for decades. Democratic and Republican voters are much more divided along geographic, racial, cultural, and ideological lines than in the past. Polarization in Washington reflects polarization within the American electorate. The result has been gridlock in Washington along with increasing divergence of social and economic policies at the state level with red states and blue states moving in opposing directions. I argue that the only way to end gridlock in Washington is party democracy, which would require, at a minimum, ending the Senate filibuster but, ideally, major constitutional reforms such as eliminating midterm elections.*

The government in Washington is dysfunctional. That is one of the few things that Democrats and Republicans can agree on these days. Our nation faces major challenges in dealing with such problems as continuing high unemployment, growing inequality, an aging population, climate change, deteriorating infrastructure, poorly performing schools, lack of access to affordable health care, and gun violence. Yet Congress and the president seem incapable of agreeing on policies to address these challenges (Mann and Ornstein 2012). But while there is widespread agreement that our national government is not working well and has not been working well for some time, there is considerable disagreement about the causes of this problem and what, if anything, can be done to remedy it.

Some scholars and observers of American politics have laid the blame for gridlock in Washington squarely on the nation's political leaders. According to this view, the problem affecting American government today is excessive partisanship: Democratic and Republican elected officials are unwilling to compromise with each other in order to

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address the nation's pressing problems because they are primarily concerned about protecting their own power and positions in Washington, and they fear a backlash from party leaders, liberal or conservative media outlets, financial contributors, and ideologically extreme primary voters if they are seen as cooperating with members of the opposing party. The solution, according to this theory, is to change the rules of Congress and/or the electoral process to reduce the incentives for partisan behavior and increase the incentives for bipartisan compromise (Edwards 2012; Eilperin 2006).

In this article, I will present evidence that this elitist theory of government dysfunction is deeply flawed. While party leaders, media outlets, financial contributors, and primary voters have played a role in the development of gridlock, they are not the main causes of dysfunctional government in Washington. As a result, reform proposals that focus primarily on changing electoral rules or congressional procedures are unlikely to be effective in reducing gridlock. The main cause of dysfunctional government in Washington today is partisan polarization—the deep ideological divide that exists between Democrats and Republicans—and that ideological divide in turn reflects the existence of deep divisions within American society.

## The Rise of Partisan Polarization and Its Consequences

There is widespread agreement among students of American politics that the ideological divide between the Democratic and Republican Parties in Congress has widened considerably over the past several decades (Dodd and Oppenheimer 2009; Sinclair 2009). Perhaps the most important evidence of this comes from the statistical analyses of congressional voting patterns by political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal (1997). Their methodology extracts the dimensions underlying the voting patterns in each Congress. In the modern era, the first and most important of these dimensions—the one that accounts for by far the largest share of the variance in congressional voting—corresponds to the liberal–conservative divide over the size of the welfare state and role of the federal government in the economy.

Poole and Rosenthal's DW-Nominate scale measures the locations of members of the Senate and House of Representatives on the first dimension extracted from all of the recorded votes in each Congress. This score measures the position of each member on a liberal–conservative continuum that ranges from −1 on the far left to +1 on the far right. We can therefore use this scale to measure the distance between the average Democrat and the average Republican in each chamber in each Congress.

The data displayed in Figure 1 show very clearly that over the past 36 years, there has been a substantial increase in the distance between the parties in both chambers and especially in the House of Representatives: the distance between the average Democrat and the average Republican almost doubled between the Ninety-Fifth House (1977-79) and the 112th House (2011-13), while the distance between the average Democrat and the average Republican increased by almost 50% between the Ninety-Fifth Senate and the 112th Senate. However, both parties were not equally responsible for this increase in ideological polarization. The data in Figure 1 clearly show that the rightward shift of the

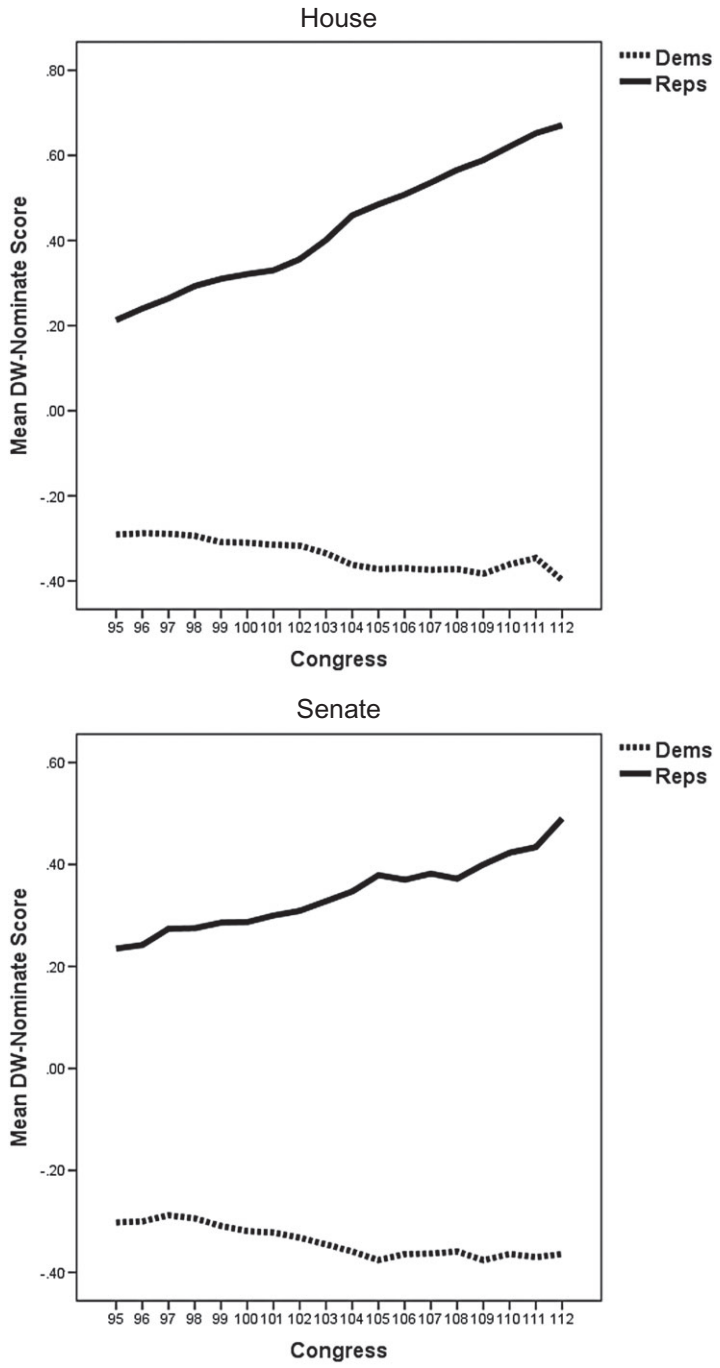


**FIGURE 1. The Rise of Partisan Polarization in the U.S. House and Senate.**
Source: http://www.voteview.org.

Republican Party over these years was much greater than the leftward shift of the Democratic Party. In fact, over 80% of the increase in the size of the ideological divide in the House, and over 70% of the increase in the Senate was a result of the rightward shift in the location of the average Republican.

The growing ideological divide between the parties in the House and Senate has had profound consequences for the congressional decision-making process. These consequences have been especially significant during periods of divided party control of Congress. In the Ninety-Seventh Congress, following the 1980 presidential election, Republicans held a majority of seats in the Senate, while Democrats held a majority of seats in the House. In the 112th Congress, following the 2010 midterm election, Republicans held a majority of seats in the House while Democrats held a majority of seats in the Senate. But despite the superficial similarity between these two congresses, the deep ideological divide between the parties in the 112th House and Senate made any sort of bipartisan compromise much more difficult than in the Ninety-Seventh Congress.

The data displayed in Table 1 show that the proportion of moderates, defined here as members with scores between −.25 and +.25 on the DW-Nominate scale, declined dramatically between the Ninety-Seventh Congress, the last time when there was divided party control of Congress for an extended period of time, and the 112th Congress. In the Ninety-Seventh Congress, moderates made up 43% of the members of both chambers and a large proportion of members of both parties in the House as well as the Senate. In contrast, in the 112th Congress, moderates made up only 15% of members of the Senate and only 5% of members of the House. The decline was especially steep for Republicans. There was only one moderate Republican in the 112th House and only five moderate Republicans in the 112th Senate.

The dramatic decline in the number of moderates and the growing ideological divide between the parties in both the House and Senate has made bipartisan compromise

**TABLE 1**
**Partisan Polarization in the Ninety-Seventh and 112th Congresses**

| | *Ninety-Seventh Congress (1981-83)* | | *112th Congress (2011-13)* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *House* | *Senate* | *House* | *Senate* |
| Very Lib Dems | 9% | 1% | 9% | 6% |
| Lib Dems | 25 | 28 | 30 | 37 |
| Moderate Dems | 22 | 17 | 5 | 10 |
| Moderate Reps | 21 | 26 | 0 | 5 |
| Conserv Reps | 20 | 21 | 9 | 23 |
| Very Conserv Reps | 4 | 7 | 46 | 19 |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Median Dem | −.31 | −.29 | −.40 | −.36 |
| Median Rep | .27 | .26 | .67 | .45 |
| Rep-Dem | +.58 | +.55 | +1.07 | +.81 |
| Chamber Median | −.06 | .00 | .45 | −.20 |
| Filibuster Pivot | N.A. | .13 | N.A. | .29 |

Source: http://www.voteview.org.

much more difficult in both chambers. It was much easier for Democrats and Republicans to come together 30 years ago when the ideological distance between them was much smaller. Today, reaching across the aisle requires reaching much further than in 1981-83. This does not matter very much in the House of Representatives where the majority party can easily pass legislation without any help from the minority party as long as long as it remains unified. But it matters a great deal in the Senate because it makes filibustering much more attractive to members of the minority party. Not only is the ideological distance between the median Democrat and the median Republican much greater now, but it is much more difficult now for the majority party to obtain 60 votes to invoke cloture because the ideological distance between the majority pivot and the filibuster pivot is much greater today than it was in the Ninety-Seventh Senate.

However, the difficulties posed by growing ideological polarization within each chamber are not the only causes of gridlock in Washington. What is just as important if not more important is the sharp ideological divide between the president and the median member of the House of Representatives and between the median member of the House and the median member of the Senate. In the Ninety-Seventh Congress, there were a large number of moderate-to-conservative Democrats in the House of Representatives who were willing to cooperate with President Ronald Reagan to pass at least some of the key elements of his domestic agenda such as large cuts in tax rates. At the same time, the relatively narrow ideological gap between the median member of the House and the median member of the Senate made it relatively easy to resolve differences between the two chambers.

In contrast, in the 112th Congress, there were almost no Republicans in the House of Representatives who were willing to cooperate with President Barack Obama to pass any parts of his domestic agenda. At the same time, there was little or no chance that the president or the Democratic majority in the Senate would support any policy proposals favored by the Republican majority in the House. The ideological divide between the president and the median member of the Senate on one side and the median member of the House on the other side was simply too great to bridge. And there is no reason to think that the situation is going to be different in the 113th Congress, which continues to have a very conservative Republican majority in the House and a Democratic majority in the Senate. The combination of ideological polarization and divided government is a nearly sure-fire recipe for conflict and gridlock, especially when the ideological divide between the executive and legislative branches is compounded by a large ideological divide between the two houses of Congress (Binder 1999).

## Explaining Gridlock: The Changing Electoral Environment

The fundamental cause of gridlock in Washington is the fact that Democrats and Republicans disagree sharply on almost every major issue facing the country from taxes and spending to gay rights and abortion. Moreover, there has been an increase in the consistency of positions on economic and cultural issues over time so that those who are liberal on economic issues are increasingly likely to be liberal on cultural issues, while

those who are conservative on economic issues are increasingly likely be conservative on cultural issues. As a result, those on opposing sides on one issue are increasingly likely to be on opposing sides on other issues. The attitude that today's ally may be tomorrow's opponent while today's opponent may be tomorrow's ally, a view that tends to dampen the intensity of political conflict, is much less prevalent than in the past. Democrats and Republicans now find themselves on opposing sides on almost all issues.

The key question here is what explains the growing ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans in Washington. Specifically, to what extent does this growing partisan divide in Washington reflect growing divisions within American society? I believe that the evidence clearly demonstrates that there is a close connection between the two. When we examine trends in election results as well as survey data on the changing characteristics and attitudes of voters, we find that over the past four decades the parties in the electorate have become increasingly divided along geographic, racial, cultural, and ideological lines (Abramowitz 2013). The types of constituencies and voters represented by Democratic and Republican elected officials are much more distinctive now than in the past (Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003).

Today, most Democratic elected officials represent strongly Democratic constituencies and receive a large share of their votes from African Americans, Latinos, and other nonwhites. Democratic voters in these constituencies tend to hold liberal views on the size and role of government as well as on social issues such as abortion and gay rights. And the more attentive, informed and active these Democratic voters are, the more likely they are to hold liberal views on these issues. Meanwhile, most Republican elected officials represent strongly Republican constituencies and receive only a tiny share of their votes from African Americans, Latinos, and other nonwhites. Republican voters in these constituencies tend to hold conservative views on the size and role of government as well as on social issues. The more attentive, informed, and active these Republican voters are, the more likely they are to hold conservative views on these issues. Thus, the large ideological differences between Democrats and Republicans in Washington reflect the large differences between the characteristics and attitudes of the voters represented by the two parties.

## A Growing Geographic Divide

One of the most striking changes in American elections over the past four decades has been a growing partisan divide among the nation's states and congressional districts. This shift can be seen very clearly in Figure 2, which compares presidential vote margins in states and House districts in two elections—1976 and 2012. I chose these two elections because they are separated by 36 years and because they were both highly competitive at the national level. In 1976, Democratic challenger Jimmy Carter defeated Republican incumbent Gerald Ford by a margin of about two percentage points in the popular vote; in 2012, Democratic incumbent Barack Obama defeated Republican challenger Mitt Romney by a margin of about four percentage points in the popular vote. But while both elections were highly competitive at the national level, the results at the state and congressional district level were very different.

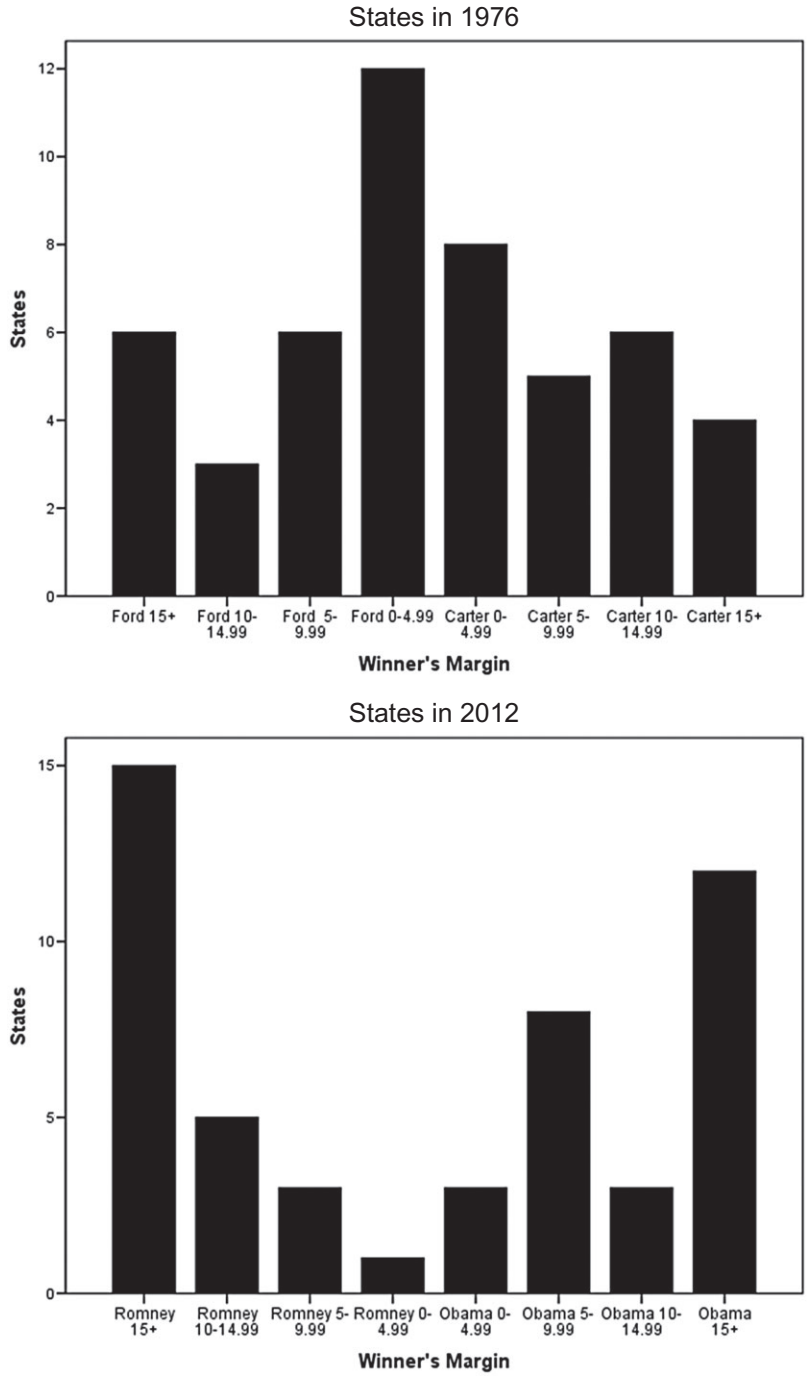


**FIGURE 2. The Changing Electoral Environment: Presidential Vote Margins in States and House Districts in 1976 and 2012.**

Source: State results from uselectionatlas.org. House results compiled by David Nir for DailyKos elections.

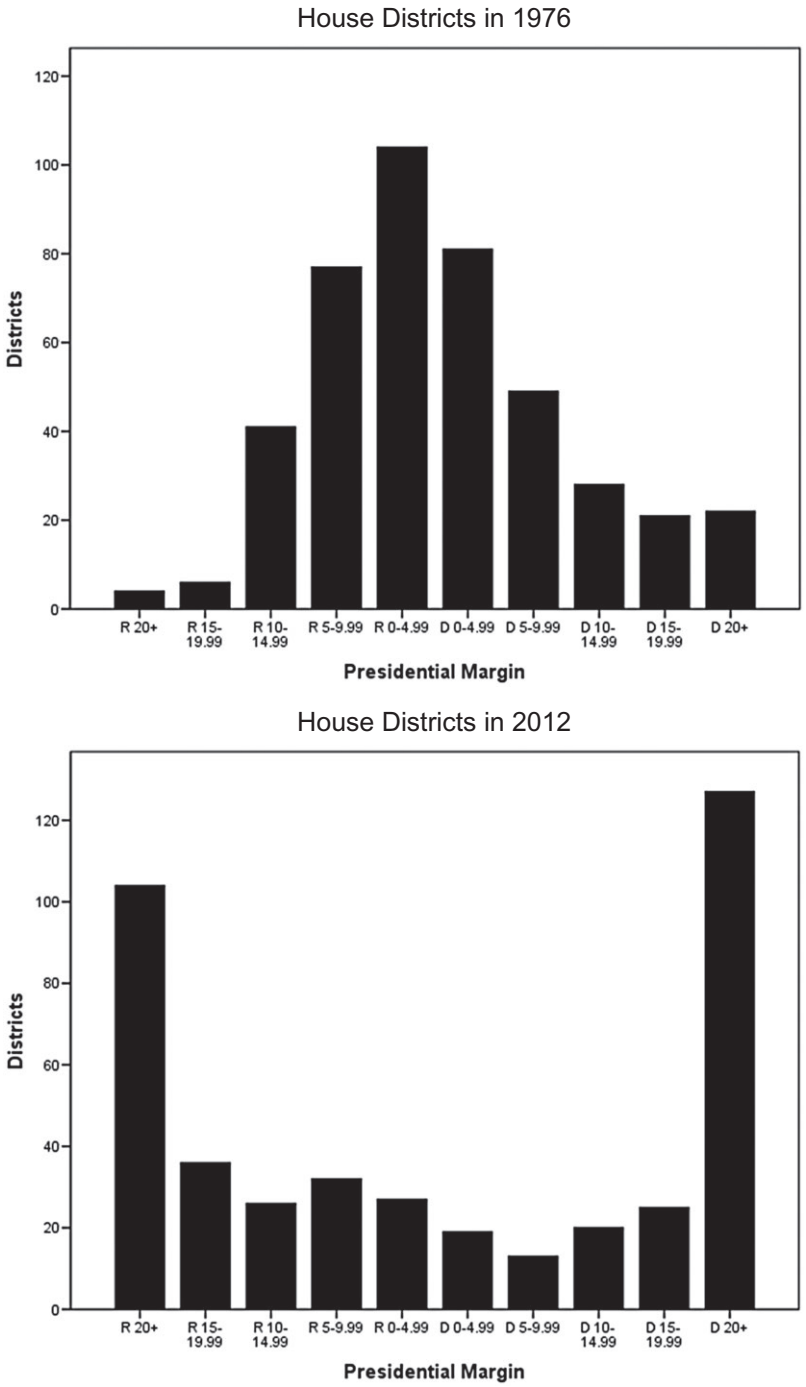


**FIGURE 2.** *Continued*

The results displayed in Figure 2 show that there were far more closely contested states in 1976 than in 2012. In 1976, 20 states with a total of 298 electoral votes were decided by a margin of less than five percentage points. This group included the nation's six most populous states—California, New York, Texas, Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Only 10 states with a total of 63 electoral votes were decided by a margin of 15 points or more. In contrast, in 2012, only four states with a total of 75 electoral votes were decided by a margin of less than five percentage points, while 27 states with a total of 286 electoral votes were decided by a margin of 15 points or more. The landslide states in 2012 included four of the six most populous states in the nation: Texas, which Romney carried by 16 points; Illinois, which Obama carried by 17 points; California, which Obama carried by 23 points; and New York, which Obama carried by 27 points.

The congressional district results show an even more dramatic shift between 1976 and 2012. There were far more competitive districts in 1976 than in 2012 and far more landslide districts in 2012 than in 1976. In 1976, 186 House districts were won by a margin of less than five percentage points, and only 26 were won by a margin of more than 20 percentage points. In contrast, in 2012, only 47 districts were won by a margin of less than five percentage points, while 232 were won by a margin of more than 20 percentage points.

The increasing number of safe districts and declining number of marginal districts in the House of Representatives over the past four decades cannot be explained by partisan gerrymandering, as some political commentators have suggested (Eilperin 2006; Monmonier 2001). I have shown elsewhere that most of this shift occurred between redistricting cycles (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). Furthermore, as we have seen, the same trend is evident at the state level, and other scholars, most notably Bill Bishop, have shown that it is also evident when one examines election results at the county level over the same time period, even though the boundaries of counties have not changed (Bishop, with Cushing 2008). This trend is clearly the result of deeper forces in American society, such as population movement, immigration, differential birth rates among whites and nonwhites, and, perhaps most importantly, an ideological realignment that has resulted in relatively conservative areas of the country, such as the deep South shifting toward the Republican Party and relatively liberal areas of the country such as the Northeast shifting toward the Democratic Party.

The decline in the proportion of competitive states and districts and increase in the proportion of landslide states and districts between 1976 and 2012 was even more significant than the results in Figure 1 alone would suggest. That is because over this time period there was also a substantial increase in the strength of the relationship between the results of presidential elections and the results of House and Senate elections. Between 1976 and 2012, the correlation between the Democratic presidential vote in a state and the Democratic Senate vote increased from .27 to .80, while the correlation between the Democratic presidential vote in a House district and the Democratic House vote increased from .67 to .95. These increased correlations reflected dramatic increases in straight-ticket voting. As a result, the proportion of states won by presidential and Senate candidates from the same party increased from 59% in 1976 to 82% in 2012,

**TABLE 2**
**Types of Seats Held by Senators and Representatives in the Ninety-Fifth and 113th Congresses**

| | *Senators* | | *Representatives* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Type of Seat* | *95th* | *113th* | *95th* | *113th* |
| Very or Fairly Safe | 24% | 58% | 25% | 77% |
| Marginal | 36 | 21 | 43 | 17 |
| High Risk | 40 | 21 | 31 | 6 |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Source: Gary Jacobson and data compiled by author.

while the proportion of House districts won by presidential and House candidates from the same party increased from 71% in 1976 to 94% in 2012.

The combination of a growing proportion of deep red and blue states and House districts and increasing party loyalty in voting has resulted in a dramatic increase in the proportion of members of Congress who represent states or districts dominated by their own party and a corresponding decline in the proportion who represent states or districts in which the parties are evenly balanced in strength or in which their own party is in the minority. These trends are displayed in Table 2. Between the Ninety-Fifth Congress (1977-79) and the 113th Congress (2013-15), the proportion of senators representing states dominated by their own party rose from 24% to 58%, while the proportion representing high-risk states fell from 40% to 21%. During this same time period, the proportion of House members representing districts dominated by their own party rose from 25% to 77%, while the proportion representing high-risk districts fell from 31% to only 6%.

As a result of these trends, compared with 30 or 40 years ago, there are far fewer members of the Senate or the House who need to be concerned about winning the support of voters in the opposing party and far more whose only real concern is maintaining the support of voters in their own party. In many of these one-party states and districts, the primary election of the dominant party is the only election that matters since the opposition party has no chance of winning a general election. Especially in the House of Representatives, where many districts are almost totally safe or one party, Democrats who represent one-party Democratic districts and Republicans who represent one-party Republican districts would only increase their chances of facing a serious primary challenge if they were seen as cooperating too much or voting too often with the opposing party.

## A Growing Racial Divide

Despite dramatic progress in race relations in recent decades, race and ethnicity continue to powerfully influence many aspects of life in the United States from housing patterns and educational opportunities to jobs and health care. Race remains a fundamental divide in American society and over the past 30 years, the impact of the racial

divide on the American party system and elections has been increasing due to the growing racial and ethnic diversity of American society (Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Tesler and Sears 2010).

The nonwhite share of the American population has increased dramatically since the 1980s as a result of higher birth rates among nonwhites and high levels of immigration from Latin America and Asia. The data displayed in Table 3 show that this demographic shift has also altered the racial composition of the American electorate although at a slower rate due to lower levels of citizenship, voter registration, and turnout among nonwhites (Frey 2008). Nevertheless, between 1992 and 2008, the nonwhite share of the electorate doubled, going from 13% to 26%. And contrary to the expectations of some conservative pundits and Republican strategists, that trend continued in 2012 with nonwhites, including African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and other nonwhites making up a record 28% of the electorate according to the national exit poll.

As the nonwhite share of the American electorate has grown in recent decades, the racial divide between the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions has steadily increased. And this deep racial divide between the party coalitions in recent years was not confined to the presidential election in which the Democratic nominee was an African American. The racial divide was just as large in the 2012 U.S. House elections. According to national exit poll data, between 1992 and 2012, the nonwhite share of Republican congressional voters increased from 5% to 11%, while the nonwhite share of Democratic congressional voters increased from 19% to 44%.[1]

The growing dependence of the Democratic Party on nonwhite voters has contributed to the flight of racially and economically conservative white voters to the GOP thereby further increasing the size of the racial divide between the party coalitions. The effects of this trend were clearly evident in voting patterns in 2012. Among white voters, according to data from the national exit poll, the 2012 election was a Republican landslide from the top of the ticket to the bottom: Democrats lost the white vote in both the presidential election and the House elections by a margin of 20 percentage points, 59% to 39%.

**TABLE 3**
**The Growing Racial Divide: Nonwhite Share of Democratic and Republican Congressional Voters in 1976, 1992, and 2012**

| | *1976* | *1992* | *2012* | *Change* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| All Voters | 10% | 13% | 28% | +18% |
| Democratic Voters | 13% | 19% | 44% | +31% |
| Republican Voters | 3% | 5% | 11% | +8% |

Source: National Exit Polls.

1. In this article I have chosen to compare the characteristics and attitudes of Democratic and Republican congressional voters rather than presidential voters in order to avoid any concern that the findings are skewed by circumstances peculiar to the presidential contest such as the presence of an African American Democratic candidate for president in 2008 and 2012. In every case, however, the differences between Democratic and Republican presidential voters were almost identical to the differences between Democratic and Republican congressional voters.

No Democratic candidate before Obama had ever won the presidency while losing the white vote by anything close to this large a margin. Yet despite this enormous deficit among white voters, Obama won the national popular vote by a margin of almost four percentage points. And despite losing the white vote by 20 percentage points, Democratic candidates for the House received about 1.4 million more votes than Republican candidates in 2012. They did this by winning 79% of the nonwhite vote to only 19% for Republican candidates. According to the exit poll, Democratic candidates defeated Republican candidates by a margin of 83 percentage points among African American voters, 38 percentage points among Hispanic voters and 48 percentage points among Asian American voters.

The result of these trends is that Democratic elected officials at all levels are much more dependent on overwhelming support from African Americans, Hispanics, and other nonwhite voters than in the past. Meanwhile, Republican elected officials at all levels continue to receive the overwhelming majority of their support from white voters. This growing racial divide, in turn, contributes to the growing ideological divide between the parties because nonwhite voters generally have much more liberal views than white voters on a wide variety of issues involving the proper size and role of government in American society.

As the nonwhite share of the electorate continues to grow over the next few decades, the racial divide between the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions is likely to increase further. Nonwhites already make up a majority of Democratic voters in California, the nation's most populous state, and in many southern states including Texas, the nation's second most populous state. Within 10 years, nonwhites will probably comprise over half of Democratic voters in the nation. And the growing dependence of the Democratic Party on nonwhite voters is likely to continue to drive racially and economically conservative white voters toward the Republican Party.

## A Growing Cultural Divide

In addition to a growing racial divide, the past 30 years have been marked by a growing cultural divide between supporters of the two major parties in the United States, especially between white supporters of the two major parties. In the past, Democrats and Republicans were divided by religious affiliation—outside of the South, white Protestants tended to be Republicans, while white Catholics and Jews tended to be Democrats. Since the 1970s however, with the emergence of culturally divisive issues such as abortion and gay rights and efforts by Republican leaders to appeal to religiously conservative voters, a new religious divide has emerged in American politics—a religious commitment divide (Leege et al., 2001; White 2003). This divide cuts across traditional denominational lines. Strongly religious Protestants, Catholics, and even Jews are much more likely to identify with the Republican Party and vote for Republican candidates than less religious or nonreligious Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

The data displayed in Figure 3 shows that the religious commitment gap between white Democrats and Republicans was very small until the 1990s but has widened considerably since then. White Republicans today are much more likely to attend

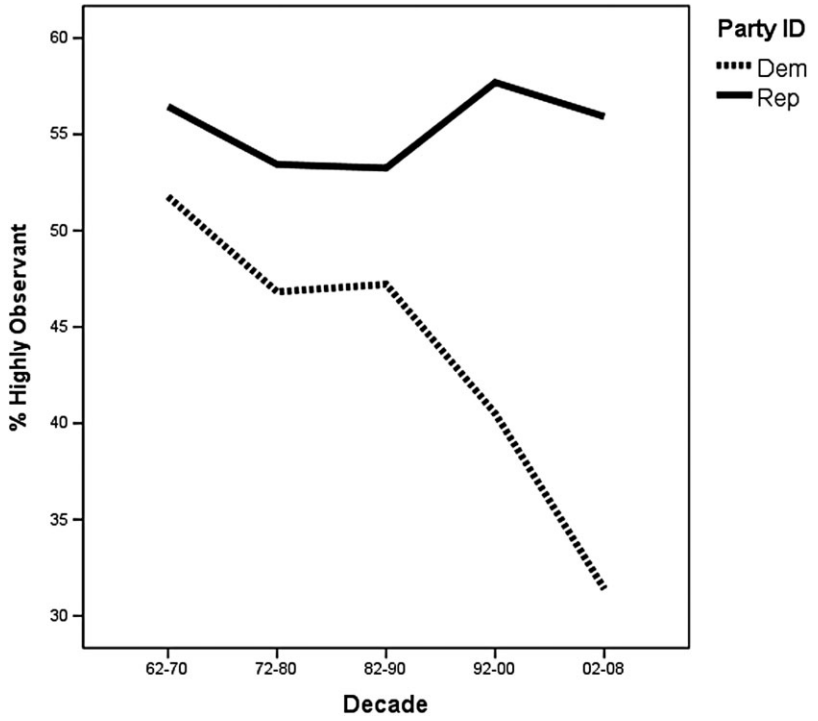


**FIGURE 3. The Growing Cultural Divide: Religiously Observant as a Share of White Democratic and Republican Congressional Voters by Decade.**
Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File.
Note: Leaning independents included with party identifiers.

religious services regularly than white Democrats. They are also much more likely to identify themselves as born-again or evangelical Christians. Thus, in 2008, according to data from the American National Election Study (ANES), white born-again or evangelical Christians made up 54% of Republican congressional voters compared with only 24% of Democratic congressional voters. And these highly religious white voters are much more likely to hold conservative opinions on a wide range of issues, especially cultural issues such as abortion and gay rights. For example, in the same ANES survey, 53% of white born-again and evangelical Christians identified themselves as strongly conservative, placing themselves at the two most conservative positions on the 7-point liberal–conservative scale, compared with only 21% of other white voters, and 59% of white born-again and evangelical Christians opposed legalizing either civil unions or marriage for same-sex couples compared with only 24% of other white voters.

## A Growing Ideological Divide

The growing racial and cultural divides between Democratic and Republican voters are politically significant because they correspond to a widening ideological divide

between supporters of the two parties. Over the past four decades, as the parties in Congress have been moving apart, so have the parties in the electorate. Thus, the data displayed in Figure 4 show that when it comes to ideological identification, Democratic voters have been moving steadily to the left since the 1970s, while Republican voters have been moving steadily to the right. As was true for members of Congress, Republican voters have veered more sharply to the right than Democratic voters have shifted to the left, although the difference in this case is not as dramatic. As a result of the combined effects of these shifts, the distance between the average Democratic voter and the average Republican voter more than doubled over this time period.

Democratic and Republican elected officials today represent electoral coalitions with strongly diverging policy preferences across a wide range of issues. Perhaps no issue illustrates the deep divide between Democratic and Republican voters in recent years more starkly than health care. Even before the debate over President Obama's proposed health care reform plan began in Congress, there was a sharp divide within the electorate over the proper role of the federal government in providing health care to the American public. This can be seen very clearly in Figure 5, which displays the opinions of Democratic and Republican congressional voters on a question included in the 2008 ANES in which respondents were asked to indicate their support or opposition to the

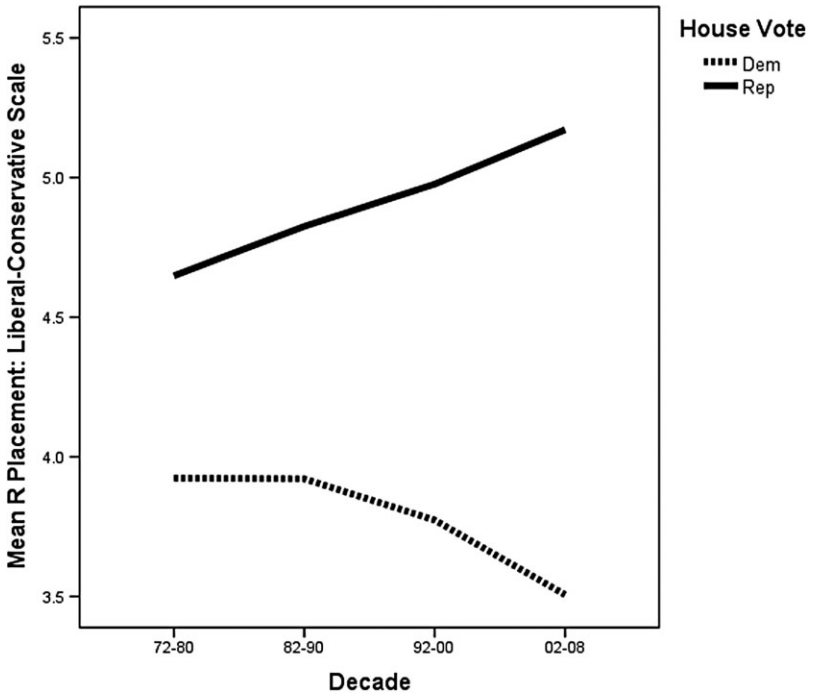


**FIGURE 4. The Growing Ideological Divide: Conservatism of Democratic and Republican Congressional Voters by Decade.**
Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File.

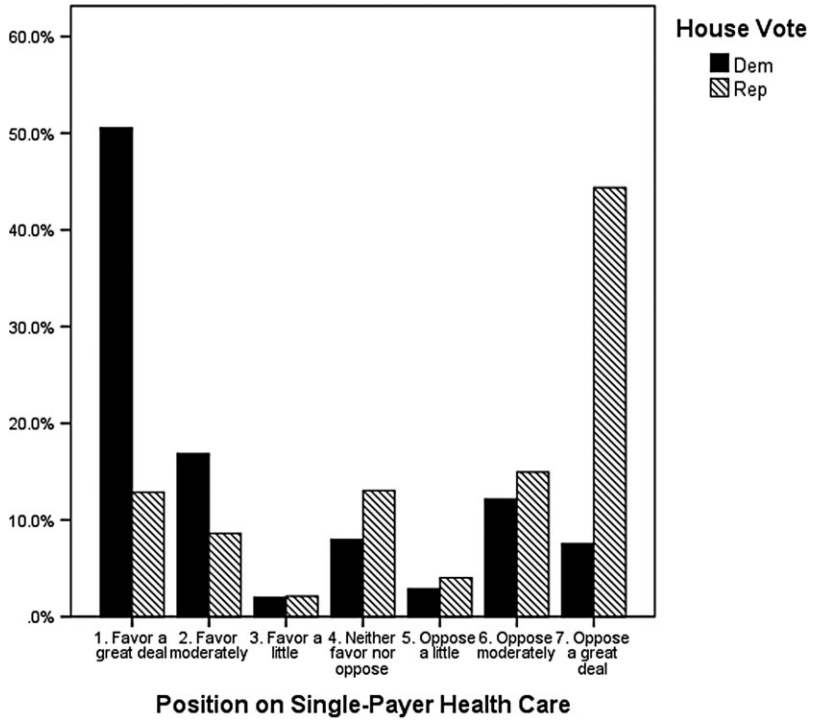


**FIGURE 5. Polarized Coalitions in 2008: Preferences of Democratic and Republican Congressional Voters on Single-Payer Health Care System.**
Source: 2008 American National Election Study.

creation of a single-payer health care system in the United States on a seven-point scale. Needless to say, this would have resulted in a far more radical transformation of health care in the United States than the law that was ultimately passed by Congress and signed by President Obama.

The data displayed in Figure 5 reveal a sharp divide between Democratic and Republican voters on the issue of health care reform with the vast majority of Democratic voters supporting creation of a single-payer health care system in the United States, and the vast majority of Republican voters opposing this proposal. Not only were large majorities of Democratic and Republican voters on opposing sides on this issue, but their opinions were highly polarized. Over 50% of Democratic voters placed themselves at the far left end of the seven-point scale, while over 40% of Republican voters placed themselves at the far right end of the scale. Relatively few Democratic or Republican voters placed themselves at or near the center of the scale. And the divisions between Democratic and Republican voters were even sharper among the 60% of voters who rated health care reform as an extremely or very important issue. Among this group, 68% of Democratic voters placed themselves on the far left, while 63% of Republican voters placed themselves on the far right.

Based on these results, it is hardly surprising that the debate in Congress over health care reform produced a sharp divide between the parties. Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate were accurately reflecting the views of their supporters in the electorate, with Democrats strongly supporting a major expansion of the role of the federal government in providing access to health care and Republicans strongly opposing such an expansion. And the passage of what became known as Obamacare in 2010 did nothing to lessen this divide. When voters in the 2010 midterm election were asked about their opinions of the Affordable Care Act in the national exit poll, 87% of Democratic voters wanted the law preserved including 63% who wanted it expanded. On the other hand, 80% of Republican voters wanted the health care law repealed. Given these results, it was hardly surprising that after Republicans won a majority of seats in the House of Representatives in the midterm election, they tried repeatedly to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Nor was it surprising that the Democratic-controlled Senate repeatedly rejected these proposals. In this case, as in the initial passage of the Affordable Care Act, Democrats and Republicans in Congress were accurately reflecting the opinions of the voters who put them in office.

The policy divide between the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions now encompasses a wide variety of issues including both economic and social issues. This is clearly evident in Table 4, which compares the preferences of Democratic and Republican congressional voters in the 2012 national exit poll on the proper role of government along with four specific policy issues—health care reform, taxes, abortion, and same-sex marriage. On every one of these questions, a majority of Democratic voters were on the liberal side, while a majority of Republican voters were on the conservative side. The divide between supporters of the two parties was especially stark on the issue of health care where the question in 2012, as in 2010, was whether the Affordable Care Act should be preserved or repealed. And in 2012, as in 2010, the vast majority of Democratic voters wanted the law to be preserved or expanded, while the vast majority of Republican voters wanted it to be partially or completely repealed.

It is striking that the data in Table 4 show that the divide between Democratic and Republican voters on cultural issues in 2012 was as deep as it was on more traditional economic issues. Thus an overwhelming majority of Democratic voters favored keeping

**TABLE 4**
**The Policy Divide in 2012: Opinions of Democratic and Republican Congressional Voters on Domestic Issues**

| | *Democratic Voters* | *Republican Voters* |
|---|---|---|
| Favor Activist Government | 74% | 17% |
| Favor Keeping Health Care Law | 81% | 14% |
| Favor Raising Income Taxes | 83% | 44% |
| Favor Same-Sex Marriage | 73% | 29% |
| Favor Legal Abortion | 82% | 43% |

Source: 2012 National Exit Poll.

abortion legal under almost all or most circumstances, while the a large majority of Republican voters favored making abortion illegal under almost all or most circumstances. Similarly, almost three-fourths of Democratic voters supported legalizing same-sex marriage in their state compared with barely one-fourth of Republican voters.

Despite the rising tide of public support for legalizing same-sex marriage in recent years, numerous polls before and after the 2012 election have found that the party divide on this issue remains very deep. Even as overall support for same-sex marriage has grown, there has been little if any increase in support among Republicans. Thus, a March, 2013 CNN Poll found that overall support for legalizing same-sex marriage had risen to 53% from only 44% in 2009. But the same poll found a sharp partisan divide on this issue with 70% of Democrats favoring legalization compared with only 25% of Republicans.

## Political Engagement and Ideological Polarization

The evidence presented thus far shows that Democratic and Republican elected officials in the United States owe their positions to voters with sharply diverging views on a wide range of issues including both economic and social issues. But the ideological divide between Democratic and Republican voters becomes even larger when we examine those voters who are more interested, informed and politically active (Abramowitz 2010). This can be seen very clearly in Table 5 which displays the average locations of Democratic and Republican identifiers, including leaning independents, on the seven-point liberal–conservative scale in relation to their level of political activism based on data from the 2008 ANES. Respondents coded as "inactive" engaged in no activities; those coded as "low" engaged in only one activity, which was usually voting; those coded as "moderate" engaged in two activities, which usually involved voting and trying to influence the vote of a friend, relative or co-worker; and those coded as "high" engaged in at least three activities, which usually involved voting, trying to influence someone else's vote, and one other activity such as displaying a bumper sticker or yard sign or giving money to a party or candidate.

The results displayed in Table 5 show a very strong relationship between political activism and polarization—the higher the level of activity, the larger the divide between

**TABLE 5**
**Political Engagement and Polarization in the 2008 Electorate: Mean Liberal–Conservative Position of Democratic and Republican Identifiers by Level of Participation**

| *Level of Participation* | *% of Sample* | *Overall Mean* | *Dem Mean* | *Rep Mean* | *Rep-Dem Difference* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inactive | 9 | 4.2 | 4.0 | 4.7 | +0.7 |
| Low | 32 | 4.3 | 3.7 | 5.0 | +1.3 |
| Moderate | 33 | 4.4 | 3.2 | 5.4 | +2.2 |
| High | 26 | 4.1 | 2.8 | 5.7 | +2.9 |

Source: 2008 American National Election Study.
Note: Leaning independents included with party identifiers.

Democrats and Republicans. At the highest level of activism, among the approximately one-fourth of respondents who reported engaging in two or more activities beyond voting, the divide between the parties was very large indeed. To illustrate this point, Figure 6 displays the distribution of these politically active Democratic and Republican identifiers on the liberal–conservative scale which has been collapsed from seven categories to five by combining the two most extreme categories on the left and the two most extreme categories on the right. The data displayed in this figure show a high degree of polarization among these active Democrats and Republicans with over half of Democratic identifiers on the far left and close to two-thirds of Republican identifiers on the far right.

The positions taken by active Democrats and Republicans on the liberal–conservative scale were consistent with the positions taken by these two groups on a wide variety of specific policy issues. For example, 72% of active Democrats took the prochoice position on the issue of abortion compared with only 21% of active Republicans, 72% of active Democrats favored the creation of a single-payer health care system in the United States compared with only 4% of active Republicans, and 74% of active Democrats favored a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants compared with only 31% of active Republicans.

These results indicate that when Democratic and Republican elected officials interact with the more politically engaged voters within their reelection constituencies—the voters who are the most attentive to what they are doing, the most likely to influence their friends and neighbors, the most likely to donate money to their campaigns, and the

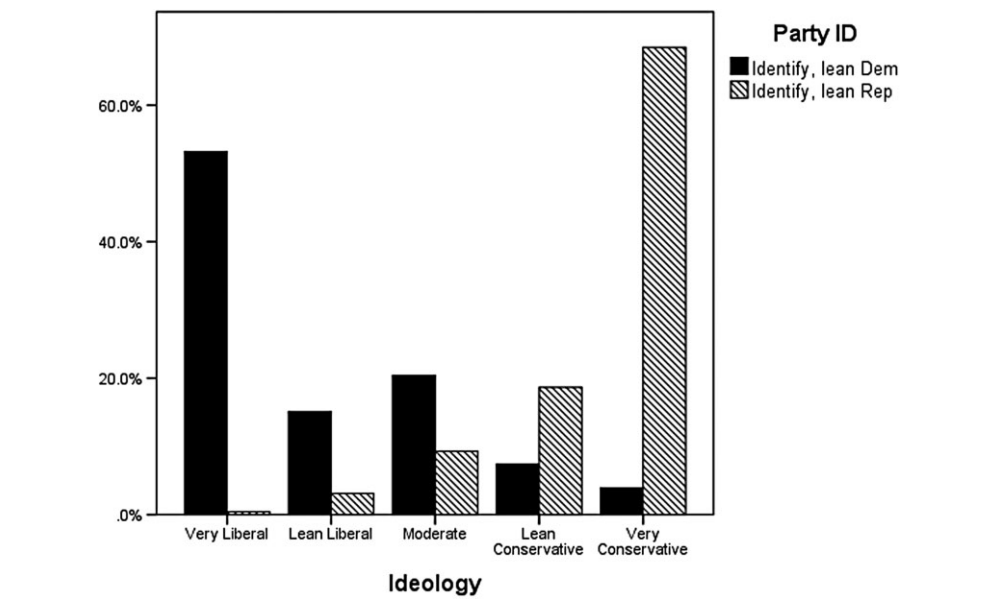


**FIGURE 6. Polarized Electoral Coalitions in 2008: Ideologies of Politically Active Democratic and Republican Identifiers.**
Source: 2008 American National Election Study.

most likely to vote in primary elections—the divide between their supporters and their opponents is even greater than it is among rank-and-file voters. Active supporters of Democratic elected officials are generally very liberal, while active supporters of Republican elected officials are generally very conservative. And since the large majority of these elected officials now represent states or districts dominated by their own party, in which the greatest threat to one's political career would be likely to come from a primary challenge rather than a general election challenge, the opinions of these active partisans carry even more weight.

## Polarization and American Democracy: is Gridlock Inevitable?

Regardless of the outcomes of future presidential and congressional elections, the deep ideological divide between the two major parties will remain a major obstacle to any meaningful bipartisan compromise on major policy issues for the foreseeable future. Moreover, unless the rules governing debate in the Senate are modified, even under unified party control it is almost certain that the minority party in the Senate will hold considerably more than the 41 votes needed to block legislation by using the filibuster. And neither party has shown any hesitation in recent years about using the filibuster along with holds and other delaying tactics to thwart the will of the majority (Smith 2012). During 2009-10 when Democrats controlled both chambers of Congress and the White House, Republicans routinely used filibusters and holds to block Democratic legislation and President Obama's nominees to the courts and key administrative positions. There is little doubt that Senate Democrats would use the same tactics to obstruct the will of a Republican majority if they found themselves in the minority after the 2014 election.

The fundamental problem is that the American political system, based on the Madisonian principles of separation of powers and checks and balances, was not designed to work under conditions of intense partisan polarization. Political parties in their modern form did not exist at the time of the founding, of course. Indeed, the founders viewed parties as dangerous fomenters of conflict. But modern political parties quickly developed during the first half of the nineteenth century with the expansion of the franchise and the need to mobilize a mass electorate. Today, parties are generally considered essential for the effective functioning of representative democracy, providing a link between candidates and elected officials, and the public and clarifying the choices for voters in elections.

Within government, parties also play a vital role in the American political system by organizing the legislative process and helping to bridge the separation of powers by creating a bond of self-interest between the president and members of his party in the House and Senate. For the bond of self-interest to work, however, the president and both chambers of Congress must be controlled by the same party. When that is not the case, and divided party control of the White House and at least one chamber has been much more common since World War II than previously, the result is either bipartisan compromise or gridlock and, as we have seen since the 2010 midterm election produced

the most conservative House of Representatives in decades, the deeper the ideological divide between the parties, the greater the likelihood of gridlock.

There are two formulas for overcoming gridlock. One involves bipartisan compromise, which is the preferred solution of many editorial writers and pundits. They wonder why Democrats and Republicans cannot get together and move past their parties' entrenched positions to "do what is in the best interest of the country." The answer is that Democrats and Republicans today profoundly disagree on what is in the best interest of the country. In fact, their ideas about what should be done to address the nation's biggest problems are fundamentally incompatible. Democrats, for example, believe strongly that the best way to create jobs and grow the economy is to increase government spending in order to stimulate demand for goods and services, while Republicans believe just as strongly that the best way to create jobs and grow the economy is to reduce government spending and regulation and cut taxes on corporations and upper-income Americans in order to increase incentives for investment in the private sector. And when it comes to cultural issues like abortion, the divide is just a deep if not deeper. It is almost impossible to reconcile the view of most Democrats that women have a fundamental right to choose whether to continue a pregnancy and the view of most Republicans that abortion is immoral and should be banned or allowed only under extraordinary circumstances.

As long as these fundamental differences between Democrats and Republicans continue to exist, and there is little reason to expect them to disappear any time soon, bipartisan compromise is going to be very difficult. And simply urging an end to partisan in-fighting, as many pundits and editorial writers have done, is not going to accomplish anything. As we have seen, the diverging positions of Democratic and Republican elected officials and candidates reflect the diverging positions of those who put them in office. Gridlock does not reflect a failure of democratic representation—gridlock reflects effective democratic representation of diverging constituencies.

## Party Democracy as an Alternative to Bipartisan Compromise: Promise and Pitfalls

A more plausible formula for overcoming gridlock under these circumstances is party democracy. Under party democracy, a system that exists in some countries with a parliamentary political system such as the United Kingdom, the party that wins an election gets to carry out the policies it campaigned on until the next election, at which point the voters get to choose whether to keep that party in power or replace it with the opposition party. Of course the situation gets more complicated, and electoral accountability becomes more difficult, when one party does not have a majority of seats in the legislature and a coalition government must be formed.

The American system of checks and balances and separation of powers was clearly not designed with party democracy in mind. In recent years, however, something resembling party democracy has become more prevalent at the state level. As we have seen, blue states have been getting bluer, while red states have been getting redder. As a result, following the 2012 election, the parties shared legislative control in only three states—

Iowa, Kentucky, and New Hampshire—which was the lowest number since 1944, and one party controlled both the legislature and the governorship in 38 states, with veto-proof supermajority control in half the chambers nationwide.

Gridlock in Washington has meant that more and more important decisions on issues from abortion and gun control to health care and environmental regulation are being made at the state level, but states are moving in diverging directions depending on which party is in control of state government. As Ray Scheppach, a former executive director of the National Governors Association, recently explained to Alan Greenblatt of National Public Radio, "in previous years, new policies might have originated in either Democratic or Republican states, but they tended to spread eventually pretty much everywhere, regardless of partisan leanings. Now, though, states are following almost entirely separate and distinct tracks (Greenblatt 2013)."

The consequences of this development were clearly apparent in the months following the horrific massacre of 27 children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December of 2012. After the Newtown massacre, some Democratic-controlled states moved to adopt tougher firearms regulations, while some Republican-controlled states moved to ease regulations governing access to guns in schools and other public buildings. The problem with party democracy at the state level, however, is that the end result is a patchwork of inconsistent and sometimes contradictory policies. And some problems, such as climate change, clearly cannot be dealt with effectively on a state-by-state basis.

Party democracy also requires meaningful electoral competition so that the governing party can be held accountable by the voters based on its performance. However, there appears to be little electoral accountability in states where one party is dominant. Even if political leaders do a poor job, the dominant party is unlikely to be evicted from power. The only practical way of holding leaders accountable in these one-party states is through intraparty competition in primary elections which, as V. O. Key (1949) pointed out long ago, is a poor substitute for meaningful inter-party competition.

At the federal level, there is meaningful two-party competition, but there are other obstacles to party democracy. Effective party democracy would require unified party control of the executive and legislative branches for a long enough time period to allow the majority party's policies to be enacted and implemented, a requirement that midterm elections frequently interfere with. Two years simply may not be enough time for major changes in the direction of public policy to be adopted and implemented. In the case of health care reform, for example, many of the key provisions of the Affordable Care Act, which was passed by Congress and signed into law in early 2010, were not even scheduled to be implemented until 2014. Four of the last six presidential elections produced unified party control of the executive and legislative branches: 1992, 2000, 2004, and 2008. In three of these four cases, however—1992, 2004, and 2008—the midterm election two years later resulted in the opposition party regaining control of one or both chambers of Congress.

Divided government has been the rule rather than the exception in Washington since the 1950s. Of the 31 elections between 1952 and 2012, 19 resulted in divided party control of the executive and legislative branches including eight of 16 presidential

elections and 11 of 15 midterm elections. And divided party control is not the only obstacle to party democracy in Washington. Effective party democracy would also require an end to antimajoritarian rules like the Senate filibuster that allow the minority party to frustrate the will of the majority as occurred frequently even when Democrats enjoyed unified control of the executive and legislative branches during 2009 and 2010. During this period, the frequency of filibusters soared as Republican leaders saw this as their last line of defense against legislation supported by President Obama and congressional Democrats.

Effective party democracy would require major reforms of the American political system. Although some of these reforms, such as ending the filibuster in the Senate, could be accomplished through a simple majority vote to change the rules, others, such as eliminating midterm elections, would require amending the Constitution—something that is very difficult under any circumstances and almost impossible in today's polarized political environment. Party democracy is also a risky approach to policy making because it requires the minority party to accept the right of the majority party to implement its policy agenda no matter how much the minority party dislikes those policies. This may explain why members of the majority party in the Senate have been unwilling to eliminate the filibuster—they fear losing the ability to block the majority's policies when they are again in the minority. But the fact that members of the majority party are likely to find themselves in the minority at some point in the near future can act as a check on abuses of power or ideological overreach. And in a polarized political system, the alternative to party democracy is not bipartisan compromise—it is continued gridlock.

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