Why So Much Partisan Polarization in the U.S. Congress?

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Introduction

Partisan polarization = party members on opposite sides in congressional behavior

Caveat: some polarization natural; parties should differ on issues

Manifested in two ways:

• Tactical use of weapons of opposition: agenda control (e.g., refusal to bring legislation onto floor, delayed/blocked confirmations), use of filibuster, “poison pill” amendments to major legislation
• Recorded roll call votes on policy issues
Weapons of Partisan Opposition

Senate filibusters, used by minority party:
• Increased since early 1970s, especially since 1995, as measured by motions to cut off debate through “cloture” (Figure 1)
• Threatened filibusters now common, actual filibusters (e.g., Cruz, Paul) rare

Republican Hastert rule: bills do not go to floor if majority of GOP caucus opposes (few exceptions)

Campaign combat tactics, position taking rather than policy making:
• Panders to base (e.g., Obamacare repeals)
• “Gotcha” votes and “poison pill” amendments: Gingrich pioneered in 1980s


Heightened battles since 1980s to block/delay confirmation of presidential nominees when president’s party lacks substantial Senate majority:
• Life-time judicial appointments (Bork denial in 1987, Garland now)
• Executive branch appointments (e.g., Lynch confirmation)
Figure 1
Senate Filibusters, 1917-2015
(source: www.senate.gov/pagelayout/reference/cloture_motions/clotureCounts.htm)
Party Polarization in Roll Call Voting

**Ideological polarization** = difference between parties in voting on liberal vs. conservative issues

- Keith Poole (voteview.com) finds most roll call votes have fallen along a single liberal-conservative continuum since 1879
- Figures 3 and 4 show Democrats and Republicans on liberalism-conservatism
- Partisan polarization is difference between them: how much one party’s members diverge from the other party’s members on this continuum

The historical record: congressional polarization, 1879-2015 (Figure 2)
- 2015 highest for both House and Senate in its entire history
- House and Senate polarization go up and down in tandem ($r = .89$)
- House is higher in recent years due to more homogeneous district electorates
- Rise in polarization due mainly to increasing Republican conservatism (Figures 3 and 4)
- Southern Democrats more conservative than northern Democrats from 1930s to recent times, but there are now very few of them
Figure 2
Congressional Party Polarization on Liberal-Conservative Dimension, 1879-2015
(source: Poole, voteview.com/blog, 2/17/16)
Figure 3
Party Means on Liberal-Conservative Dimension, House 1879-2015
source: Poole, voteview.com/blog, 2/17/16
Figure 4
Party Means on Liberal-Conservative Dimension, Senate 1879-2015
source: Poole, voteview.com/blog, 2/17/16
Party Polarization in Congress: Crossover Voters

Crossover voting (flip side of polarization) = % who vote with members of opposing party on liberal vs. conservative issues (Figure 5, through 2014)

• House of Representatives: hardly any or no crossover Democrats or Republicans since mid-1990s
  o Lowest since 1920s and before
  o >40% were crossovers from 1930s into early 1980s

• Senate
  o Similar pattern to House (r=.85 between House and Senate)
  o Steady decline since World War II

Extremely polarized members of Congress (members who never vote with other party)

• More House Republicans than ever, now > 80%, are ideologically extreme (Figure 6)
• Senate Republicans not as extreme as House Republicans, but still >60% are, and less extreme than Democrats were in late 19th century (Figure 7)

Complete separation of congressional Democrats and Republicans today: no Republican votes more liberally than a Democrat, and no Democrat votes more conservatively than a Republican
Figure 5
% of Members Overlapping in Ideological Voting, 1879-2014
(source: Poole, voteview.com/blog, 3/28/15)
Figure 6

% of Ideological Extremists (non-Centrists) in House Voting, 1879-2015

(source: Poole, voteview.com/blog, 2/17/16)
Figure 7

% of Ideological Extremists (non-Centrists) in Senate Voting, 1879-2015

(source: Poole, voteview.com/blog, 2/17/16)
Why More Party Polarization in Congress? “A Perfect Storm”

1. Congressional parties more internally homogeneous and farther apart in terms of ideology, with members “sorted” by ideological into parties due to:
   • Decline of Democratic South (southern conservative Members of Congress [MCs] now Republicans) and Democratic party machines in north (more purposive incentives)
   • Partisan gerrymandering and population shifts → more safe seats
   • Moderate Democrats and Republicans leaving through retirements and defeat

2. Decline of committee government & allocation of committee positions by party leaders/caucus rather than seniority → greater pressures for party loyalty

3. Heightened external pressure for ideological positioning from ideological interest groups, partisan media, campaign donors, and independent spenders

4. Increased negative campaigning → greater animosity towards other party

5. Weaker friendships across partisan lines, a result of less bipartisan socializing

6. With more competitive parties nationwide, policy stakes are higher

7. Divided government provides opportunities for opposition to block opposing party
Partisan Polarization Beyond Congress

Half of state legislatures (especially OH) even more polarized than Congress

Supreme Court decisions more divided than ever before between justices appointed by Democratic and Republican presidents

When national government is divided, which is the norm since WWII, more opposition recently between President and Congress than ever
• Divided government 60% of time since World War II
• Divided government rare (15% of time) before 1946
Conclusion

Even with Trump’s emergence as Republican nominee in “hostile takeover” of GOP on issues, partisan polarization continues in Congress

2016 campaigns likely to accentuate partisan polarization:
• Presidential campaign more negative, especially in personal attacks
• Ideological independent groups likely to spend record amounts in congressional campaigns, and it will be more negative than candidate/party spending
• Tea party pressures have led Republican candidates to resist compromise at risk of primary competition

Whether partisan polarization in Congress will subside depends on:
• Whether voters punish congressional candidates in primaries and general elections for taking extreme positions
• Ability of leadership in different parties under divided government to find some policies on which they can effectively compromise (e.g., FY17 budget, transportation funding)

My own take: excessive partisan polarization in era of divided government has prevented governments from addressing our most serious problems