



A Comparative Survey of

DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

Working Paper Series: No. 110

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Political Polarization in the United States

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Asian Barometer

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Political Polarization in the United States
Didi Kuo

Paper Prepared for *Democracy in a Divided Society: East Asia in Comparative Perspective*
An Asian Barometer Workshop
August 24, 2014

A growing number of Americans, as well as foreign observers, see democracy in the United States as dysfunctional, with the Republican and Democratic parties unable to address the core policy challenges confronting the country. Recent years have given rise to seemingly debilitating problems, including unprecedented levels of political gridlock in Congress, slow economic recovery, and growing income inequality. Scholars have attributed these problems to partisan polarization, both between parties and among citizens. Heightened polarization at the state and national levels has spurred a new research agenda, with studies showing that polarization—whether measured by roll-call votes in Congress, public opinion surveys of engaged citizens, or campaign finance expenditures—has been worsening since the 1970s. This paper examines the potential causes of polarization, and traces its effects on policymaking and public opinion. It then links polarization to American electoral institutions, and suggests potential institutional reforms that may mitigate extreme partisanship.

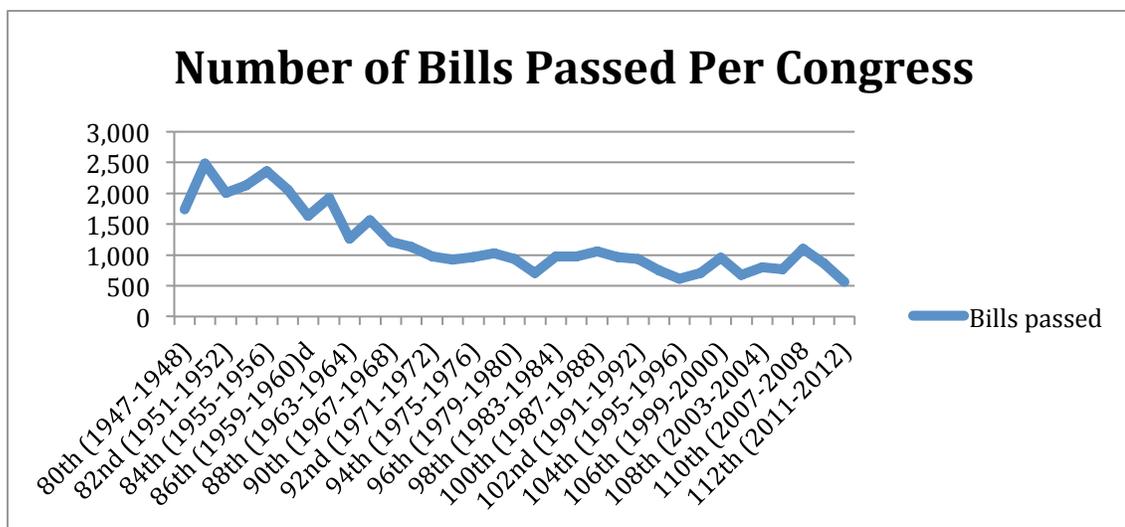
Polarization and Democratic Dysfunction

Even casual observers of American politics can see that gridlock and obstruction have become commonplace in Washington, DC. One of the clearest indicators of polarization has been the inability for parties to pass legislation in Congress. Earlier this month, Congress adjourned for a five-week recess after failing to reach agreement on major bills concerning immigration, corporate taxes, and infrastructure repair.¹ These are only the most recent in a long list of complex policy challenges that have gone unaddressed—climate change, for example, or entitlement reform. Senator Angus King, one of two independents in the Senate, lambasted Congress for its inability to work towards solutions, arguing that “our institutions aren’t working.”² Indeed, Congressional activity has been declining for years. In the most recent

¹ Jonathan Weisman and Ashley Parker, *The New York Times*, 2014. “Congress Off for the Exits, but Few Cheer.” Aug 1.

² *ibid.*

session of Congress, from 2011-2012, only 561 bills were passed—the lowest amount since 1947.³



Vital Statistics on Congress, Brookings-AEI Report, 2013

Congressional gridlock affects more than just the amount of legislation passed. In 2013, after a year of stalled negotiations over the debt ceiling and the Affordable Care Act, Congress was unable to pass a budget. As a result, the federal government was shut down from October 1-16. And while the length of the shutdown was notable, the shutdown itself was not: the United States government has been shut down 17 times since 1978 due to bargaining failures over the budget. Gridlock also affects other aspects of politics. Republicans in the Senate have delayed confirmation of President Obama’s executive and judicial appointees; Democrats employed similar dilatory tactics during President Bush’s time in office. Obstructionist tactics, such as threats to filibuster, are also deployed much more often.⁴ As a result, supermajorities—rather than simple majorities—are increasingly necessary to pass legislation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Congressional gridlock has risen alongside a broader trend of partisan polarization. Using data on roll-call votes, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2013) found that polarization has grown dramatically over the past three decades.⁵ For the better part of the

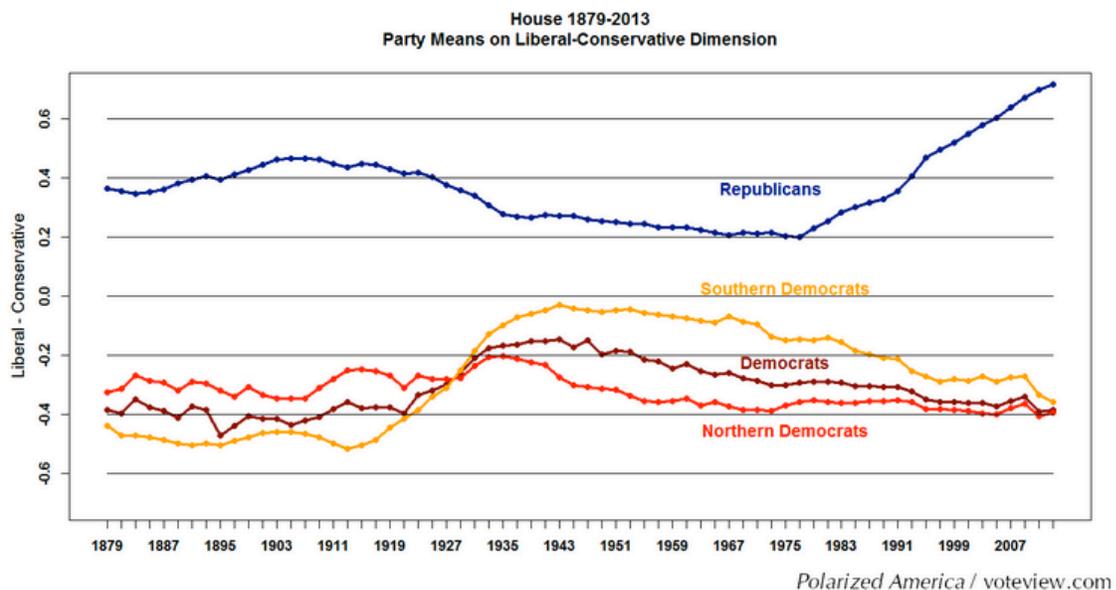
³ Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, Michael J. Malbin, and Andrew Rugg. Vital Statistics on Congress. American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution, 2013. www.brookings.edu/vitalstats.

⁴ Sarah Binder, “How political polarization creates stalemate and undermines lawmaking,” 1/13/14, <http://washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage>

⁵ McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal. *Polarized America: the Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2006.

twentieth century, polarization between the parties—measured by the ideological distance between legislators of different parties—actually declined. Since the 1970s, however, the distance between the parties has grown, and the average legislator has become less moderate. Democrats have become slightly more liberal in their voting patterns, while Republicans have become more conservative. Both parties have also become more cohesive: they vote together more often, which means there are fewer instances of cross-over voting or bipartisan agreement.

Much of this polarization is the result of ideological sorting, and a reconfiguration of the traditional coalitions forming each party’s base. A century ago, the Democratic Party included Southern conservatives and Northern liberals—a product of historical circumstance that brought together white “Dixiecrats” with urban immigrants and labor unions. The Republican Party, on the other hand, included many Northern and Midwestern moderate conservatives. After the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, and the rise of the “culture wars” over issues such as women’s reproductive freedom, these coalitions changed. The proportion of Democrats in the South declined, with conservative Democrats joining the Republican Party; similarly, moderate conservatives left the Republican Party for the Democratic Party.



Aside from ideological sorting, scholars argue about the role of parties and representation, and the extent to which polarization has been driven by the preferences of

citizens or the preferences of elites.⁶ Public opinion data shows that engaged voters have become slightly more polarized on various political issues that are salient to the left-right divide, including cultural issues (abortion and gay marriage) and the size and role of the federal government (universal health care, welfare benefits). Voters who identify as Republicans or Democrats are far more likely to display strong preferences on these issues. A recent poll by the Pew Organization found that voters have become more ideologically consistent *and* more extreme in their views over the past two decades, resulting in less overlap between partisans.⁷

There is a geographic component to rising partisanship in the electorate: Americans are more likely to live in areas with like-minded people. The journalist Bill Bishop has called this trend of geographic segregation “the big sort,” and empirical research has shown that Americans do increasingly cluster by lifestyle. Democrats, for example, prefer to live in urban areas with high population density and more public transportation, whereas Republicans prefer suburban areas with lower population density and no public transportation.⁸ Electoral patterns also show that the margin of victory in House and Presidential elections has increased, such that Republican and Democratic candidates tend to win in landslides, rather than in highly competitive races. Partisan gerrymandering cannot account for these geographic trends—rather, the concentration of liberal voters in urban areas produces electoral advantages for conservative candidates, since more House seats are allocated to rural and suburban areas.⁹

While there is evidence that some American voters have become more polarized, the vast majority of voters remain moderate in their political views. Furthermore, the proportion of voters who show discontent with the two major parties, or who say they would support a third party, has grown. Therefore, widening polarization between the parties could also be a result of elite politics, with party leaders and donors holding more extreme views than citizens.

⁶ See, e.g., Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010 and Morris Fiorina and Samuel Abrams, *Disconnect: the Breakdown of Representation in American Politics*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2009.

⁷ Pew Research Center, June, 2014, “Political Polarization in the American Public.” <http://www.people-press.org/files/2014/06/6-12-2014-Political-Polarization-Release.pdf>

⁸ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008; Jesse Sussell, 2013, “New Support for the Big Sort Hypothesis,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 46(4): 768-773.

⁹ Jonathan Rodden and Jowei Chen, 2014, “Unintentional Gerrymandering: Political Geography and Electoral Bias in Legislatures,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8: 239-269

Recent research into campaign financing and lobbying finds that the preferences of elite citizens—specifically, those with higher incomes and greater political engagement—diverge from those of average citizens.¹⁰ As a result, both parties have passed policies that cater largely to the preferences of wealthy voters, while overlooking the preferences of the middle- and lower-classes. Because the wealthy tend to favor conservative economic policies and less redistribution, studies show that the influence of a minority of citizens has exacerbated income inequality. The vast majority of campaign contributions come from individuals at the very top of the income distribution, giving them greater influence in electoral politics as well. As a result, it may be the case that polarization is driven by political elites and special interest influence, rather than by the preferences of most citizens.

Polarization, Public Opinion, and Legitimacy

American dissatisfaction with democratic institutions has risen considerably as a result of polarized politics. Polarization makes it difficult to conduct even the routine business of governing, and in the long run, polarization also threatens democratic legitimacy as more voters feel unrepresented by the major parties and show little trust in the branches of government.

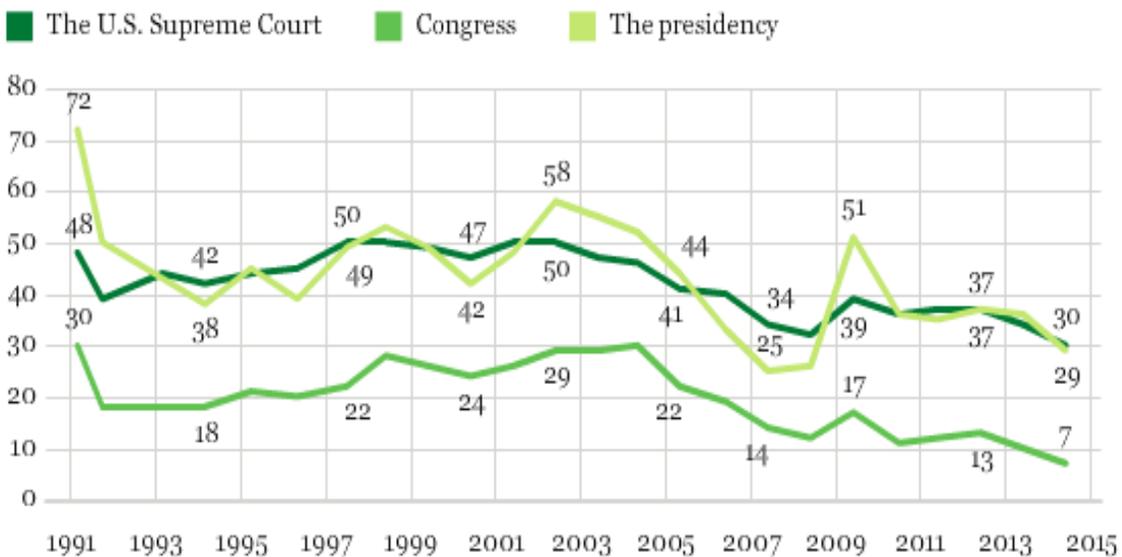
Gallup, one of the United States' foremost polling organizations, recently recorded its lowest ever level of confidence in Congress. After the debt ceiling crises of 2013, only 9% of Americans were confident in Congress; now, that number has fallen to a paltry 7%. This number includes people who report a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in Congress, and represents a historic low since Gallup began collecting responses to this question in 1946. Voters are also likely to blame both parties: between 70-80% of voters express little confidence in either the Republican or Democratic party to “make the right decisions” as legislators.¹¹

¹⁰ Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, 2014, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” forthcoming, *Perspectives on Politics*; Benjamin Page, Larry Bartels, and Jason Seawright, 2013, “Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11(1): 51-73; Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: the Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, Princeton University Press, 2010; Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and turned its back on the Middle Class*, Simon & Schuster, 2011

¹¹ Washington Post-ABC News Poll, January 2014, <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/politics/washington-post-abc-news-poll-january-20-23-2014/766/>

Americans' Level of Confidence in the Three Branches of Government

% Great deal/Quite a lot



GALLUP®

The effect of voter dissatisfaction with the mainstream parties has actually exacerbated polarization. The primary system, which requires that each candidate in a general election first win a primary election within his or her party, has led to the rise of candidates far from the mainstream. The tea party—a right-wing, libertarian faction of the Republican party—capitalized on voter discontent with Republicans to secure Congressional seats for tea party candidates in 2010 and 2012. Turnout in primary elections tends to be extremely low, hovering around 3-6% of eligible voters; those who do turn out are more politically extreme than mainstream voters. Because candidates who lose primary races cannot advance to the general election, voters are sometimes left to choose between ideologically extreme candidates who do not represent a majority of preferences in a given district. Turnout is also low in midterm elections that re-elect members to Congress every two years. High levels of dissatisfaction with the political system could very well spill over to political participation, and drive voters away from midterm elections this September.

Polarization, First-Past-the-Post, and Electoral System Reform

Some of the problems with American democracy today may be a result of structural problems embedded in our electoral institutions.¹² The United States elects almost all of its public officials at the national and state levels through the “winner-take-all” system of “first past the post.” Under this system, technically known as single-member district plurality (SMDP), each voter has one vote to cast for an office, and the winner of that office is simply the candidate who garners the most votes. Because of its tendency to produce disproportional outcomes, and to give majority power to parties that win only a plurality of the vote, this system has become increasingly unpopular around the world. In the 2012 Congressional elections, for example, Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives received over 1.4 million more votes than Republican candidates, but Republicans retained a 33-seat majority in the House. These outcomes were partially a consequence of the U.S. electoral system, in which the geographic distribution of votes can have enormous consequences for representational outcomes.

Although there is no single solution to the many problems in American politics, our current electoral institutions are failing to produce political leaders who negotiate, compromise, and govern effectively. Instead, elected representatives perceive strong incentives to stake out incompatible and uncompromising positions. Changing the rules that determine how candidates are elected can encourage moderation and correct disproportional outcomes produced by the current winner-take-all system in the United States. Thus, they have the potential to make the system fairer and more governable, though there is some tension between these two different goals.

One potential reform to the current system is ranked-choice voting (RCV). RCV still elects one winner in a single-member district, but allows voters to rank-order all of the candidates, with the winner needing to receive an absolute majority of all votes. The dual attraction of RCV is that it could be enacted by any state without federal legislation, because it utilizes single-member districts. In fact, RCV has been implemented in cities such as Cambridge, MA; Minneapolis, MN; St. Paul, MN; San Francisco, CA; Oakland, CA; and Portland, ME. Ranked-choice voting is also believed to induce moderation by requiring candidates to develop strategies to appeal for the lower-preference votes of the less popular candidates. This often

¹² Much of the material from this section comes from Didi Kuo, “Electoral System Reform in the United States,” Conference Report from the Program on American Democracy in Comparative Perspective, Stanford University, 2014.

requires reaching across partisan and ideological boundaries to develop broader (and less extreme) policy stances. RCV has the added benefit of allowing political parties while not exclusively depending on them, making it more feasible for independents to run and possibly win. It provides a kind of bottom-up response to gerrymandering, making some districts that looked uncompetitive potentially more interesting politically.

Theoretically, ranked-choice voting should produce electoral outcomes quite different from those under single-member plurality. It should reduce ideologically extreme or hyper-partisan campaign messages, since candidates have an incentive to get as many lower preference votes as possible. It should also reduce negative campaigning, because in multi-candidate races, candidates need to be highly ranked by their opponents' supporters in order to rise to a majority of the vote. RCV puts a premium on building broad coalitions rather than mobilizing a militant base with wedge issues. Because of the greater choice it offers, and the possibility that it may penalize negative campaigning, RCV may also reduce at least somewhat the influence of money in politics. Further, it should decrease the fear of "wasted votes" among voters, potentially increasing turnout and civic engagement. Certainly it would remove the possibility that a minor party candidate (such as Ralph Nader in 2000) could be, or be perceived to be, a "spoiler," swinging the race from one candidate to another, since under RCV, the lower-preference votes for such a minor candidate would be transferred to one of the major candidates.

Conclusion

Partisan polarization in the United States has been on the rise for many decades, but it is now punctuated by Congressional gridlock, voter discontent, and special interest influence. American parties seem beholden to monied interests that contribute to election campaigns and devote resources to lobbying the policymaking process. Average citizens feel that both the Republicans and Democrats are unresponsive to their needs and demands, and their unhappiness with the two parties is quickly spilling over to unhappiness with democratic institutions in general. While reforming the electoral system will not solve all of the problems related to polarization, it has the potential to ensure that voters feel more engaged with the political system, and that candidates moderate their views to secure electoral victory.