

Growth through Innovation **Political Dysfunction and Economic Decline**

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Executive Summary

Despite a well-known litany of challenges to U.S. economic growth, employment and long-term fiscal stability, the nation's policy process is in gridlock. Numerous organizations of all political persuasions have suggested congressional, budgetary and electoral reforms that would make possible more comprehensive and effective approaches to our fundamental economic problems. To improve the effectiveness of Congress, proposed reforms would, for example:

- Create incentives to shorten the appropriations process, require prompt action on presidential nominations, curtail obstructionist filibusters and allow bipartisan majorities to bring bills to the floor of the House and Senate over the objections of committees and party leaders.
- Require that members work in Congress three five-day weeks out of every four, and coordination of House and Senate schedules.
- Promote constructive discussion between Congress and the administration, in full view of the American people, via television.
- Discourage legislators from taking any pledges except the Pledge of Allegiance and their formal oath of office, establish regular off-the-record bipartisan meetings, institute bipartisan seating in full sessions as well as committees, create a bipartisan leadership committee and discourage negative campaigning against fellow members.

Other proposals would specifically address the broken congressional budget process by:

- Establishing five-year budgets for mandatory programs, coupled with enforcement mechanisms to align those programs' revenues and obligations and with increased transparency.
- Undertaking wholesale reform of the congressional committee structure to eliminate the increasingly meaningless distinction between authorizing and appropriating committees and to remove the major mandatory programs from the jurisdiction of the tax-writing committees.
- Giving proposed presidential spending reductions expedited congressional consideration.

- Using the bipartisan compromise Budget Enforcement Act of 1990, which contributed to better fiscal outcomes for nearly a decade, as a model of process reform.

Recognizing that the current level of political polarization will make it difficult for even the best new rules to succeed, proposals have been advanced to tackle a key underlying cause of excessive partisanship, the structure of the U.S. elections process. Election reform would undoubtedly be slow and difficult; however, the most promising reform options would encourage states to:

- Adopt non-partisan systems for congressional redistricting and institute more “open primaries,” in which independent voters as well as registered party members can participate.
- Adopt innovative voting systems, such as instant runoff voting, in order to give candidates incentives to reach beyond their current base.
- Expand the electorate through various means, in order to bring less committed swing voters into the process.

This paper by Brookings Senior Fellow William Galston summarizes the two principal sources of dysfunction in the economic policy process and describes in more detail many of the bipartisan recommendations for improvement.

Political Dysfunction and Economic Decline

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In a recent *New York Times* interview, MIT's Kenneth Rogoff—one of the most prescient economists of recent years—characterized the European debt crisis as “a deep constitutional and institutional problem in Europe. It is not a funding problem.”¹ The next day, World Bank President Robert Zoellick noted that “Markets are now starting not just to look at financial statistics but to make judgments about governance.”²

For Rogoff and Zoellick, the most serious issue for the European Union and the Euro zone is not economics; it is the impact of politics and institutional structures on decision-making. More than a few Americans have noted smugly that we made the transition from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution more than two centuries ago, largely to have a continent-wide government commensurate with a continental market, and that it is time for Europe to do the same.

There is truth to this, of course. Yet, the United States now has more in common with Europe than we care to admit. We face mounting economic challenges across a broad front, and here, too, political and institutional dysfunction thwart attempts to confront them.

The U.S. economy's woes constitute a familiar list: Our fiscal course is unsustainable; we invest too little in the preconditions for future growth; we have made commitments to this current generation of retired Americans that we cannot provide for the generations to come; workers with average levels of education and skills face stagnant wages and declining prospects; social mobility, the heart of the American Dream, is less robust than in many other advanced democracies; and, we are losing ground, at least for now, relative to large and rapidly growing economies, especially China's.

This is not to say that political failure is the source of these economic problems. Pervasive changes in the structure of the U.S. economy have combined with epochal shifts in the global economy to put pressure on the model of success that has guided the United States since the end of World War II, and American workers have been hit hard.

MIT economist David Autor has traced what he terms the “polarization” of the U.S. employment market. Principally in response to the rapid development of low-cost information technology, both ends of the employment spectrum—high-skill, well-compensated managerial, professional, and technical occupations and low-skill service occupations—have expanded, while medium-skill jobs have declined as a share of the total. The mechanism is straightforward: information technology makes it possible to replace workers performing many routine tasks, whether in the office or on the factory floor, with computerized systems directed by fewer, higher-skilled workers. Two sorts of jobs are exempt from this logic: personal services involving face to face relations

between human beings (think aides in nursing homes), and tasks requiring creativity and problem-solving abilities. International trade and offshoring, Autor shows, are the other great drivers of workforce polarization. “Many of the tasks that are ‘routine’ from an automation perspective are also relatively easy to package as discrete activities that can be accomplished at a distant location by comparatively low-skilled workers for much lower wages,” he says.³ In short, the combination of information technology and globalization makes it possible either to move routine tasks out of the United States or to eliminate them altogether. And the declining domestic demand for these mid-range jobs means that workers who remain in such occupations are likely to experience a continuing squeeze in compensation.

Although political dysfunction is not the source of these adverse pressures on the U.S. workforce—which millions of Americans feel directly—it largely explains why we have done so little to counter them, much less the many more indirectly perceived trends weakening the American economy. Two linked but distinct political developments are key—the growing polarization between the political parties and the diminished capacity of Congress to address difficult issues.

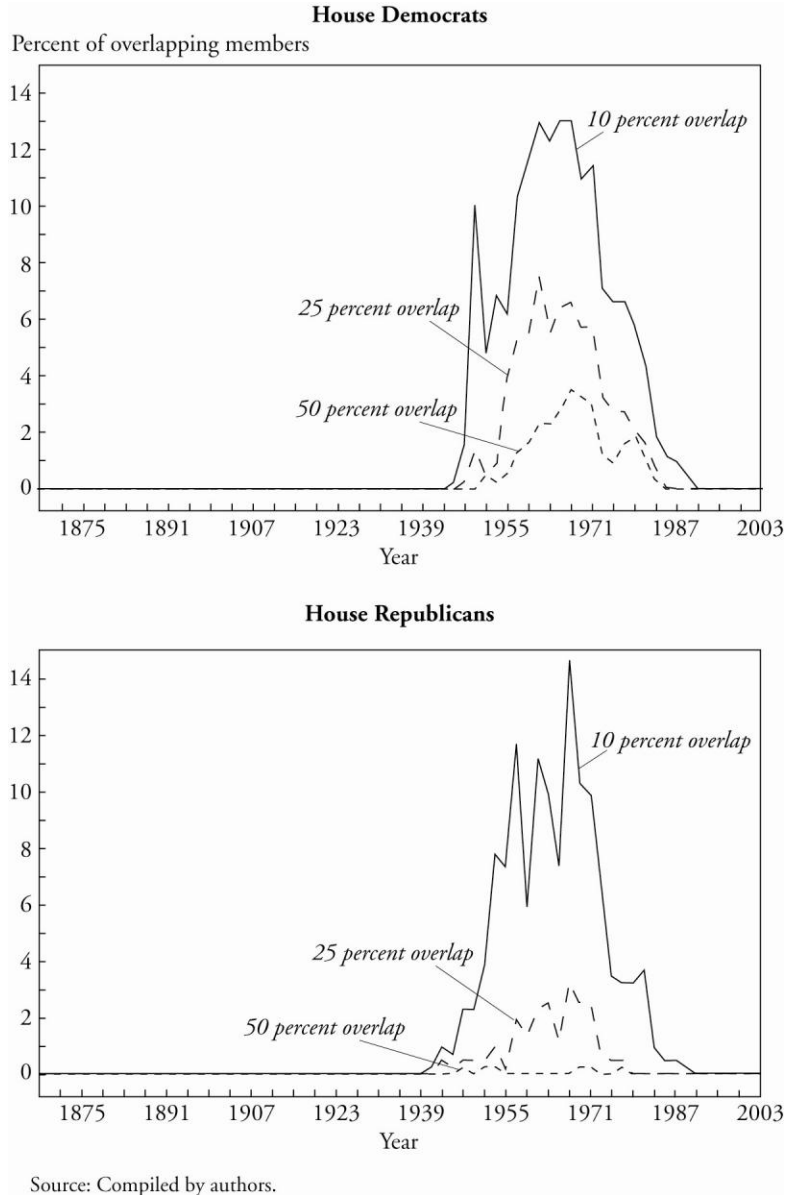
Two Sources of Political Dysfunction

During the past four decades, differences between the parties have evolved into outright polarization. The 111th Congress (2009-2010) was the most ideologically polarized in modern history. In both the House and the Senate, the *most conservative* Democrat was more liberal than was the *most liberal* Republican. If one defines the congressional “center” as the overlap between the two parties, the center has disappeared.

As David Brady and Hahrie Han have shown, this situation is not unprecedented. Party polarization in the late 19th and early 20th century was as intense as it is today. In the sweep of American history, one might well argue, the ideologically overlapping and less distinguishable political parties of the mid-20th century are the outliers, not today’s highly differentiated and adversarial parties.

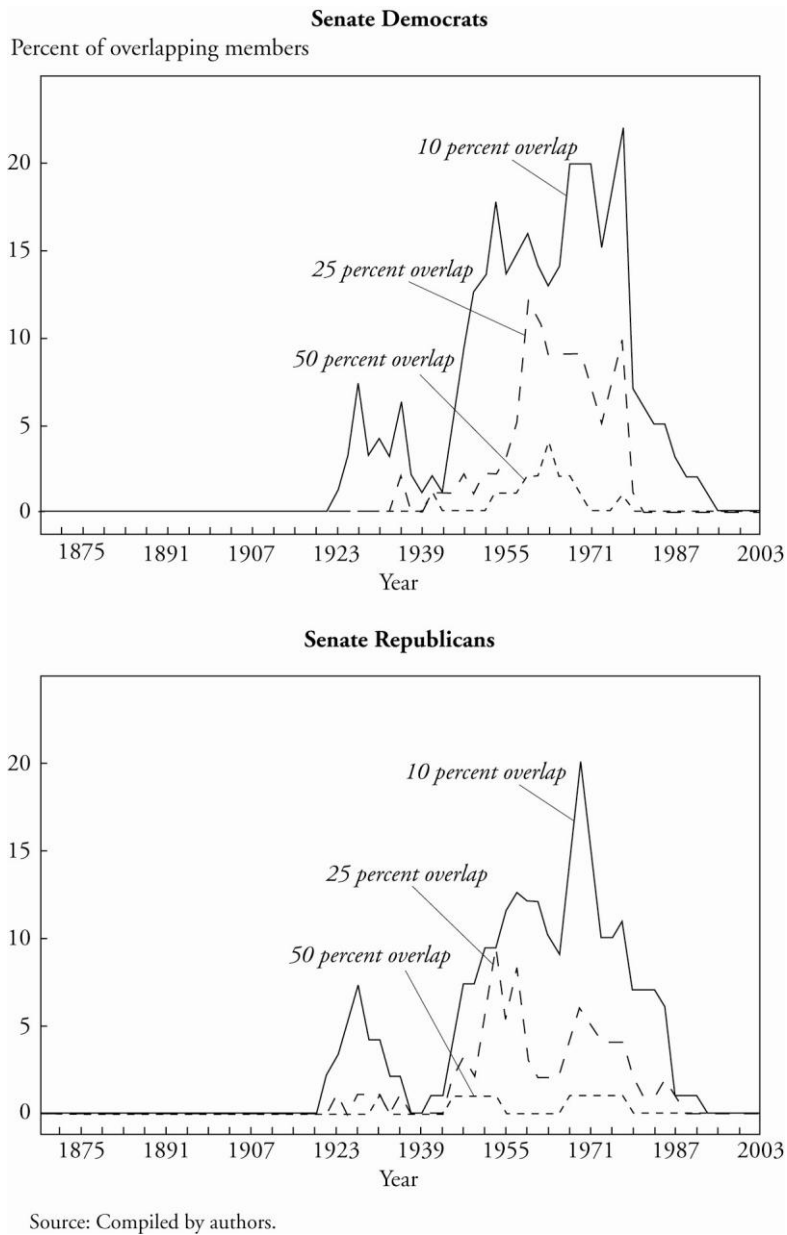
Figure 1 shows the number of members in each party whose voting overlapped with that of members from the opposite party, from 1867 through 2003. The analysis by Brady and Han starts by identifying the 10, 25, and 50 percent most liberal-voting Republicans and shows the percentage of Democrats who voted more conservatively than each of these groups; likewise, they identified the 10, 25, and 50 percent most conservative-voting Democrats and show the percentage of Republicans whose votes were more liberal than these groups. The charts clearly show that in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, there was *no overlap* between the ideologically distinct congressional parties. Then, starting in the Senate, bipartisan approaches grew until the 1970’s, before beginning their more recent sharp decline.

Fig 1: Extent of Shared Views between Political Parties, House and Senate, 1867 through 2003.



Source: Compiled by authors.

Source: David W. Brady and Hahrie C. Han, "Polarization Then and Now: A Historical Perspective." Reprinted with permission from Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Volume 1: Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics*, p. 141. © 2006, The Brookings Institution.

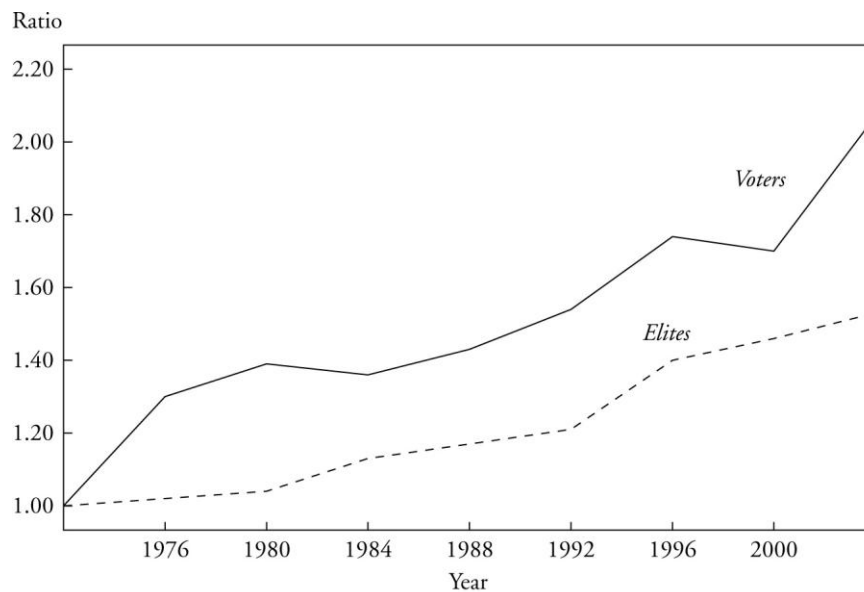


Source: *Ibid.*, p. 142. © 2006, The Brookings Institution.

Still, the unending high-decibel partisan warfare of the past decade has led many Americans to look back with nostalgia on the more consensual if muddled party system that persisted until the 1970s.

Morris Fiorina and colleagues have suggested that this increased polarization is mostly confined to party elites and elected representatives and that the ideological center of gravity of the people hasn't changed much in the past generation.⁴ An analysis of National Election Studies data challenges this view. Alan Abramowitz finds that in 1984, 41 percent of voters were located at or near the ideological center, versus only 10 percent at or near the left and right extremes. By 2004, only 28 percent remained at or near the center, while the left and right extremes had more than doubled to 23 percent.⁵ Indeed, Abramowitz suggests, polarization in the electorate actually rose faster than among elites between 1972 and 2004.

Fig 2: Trends in Partisan Polarization among Voters and Elites, 1972 – 2004.



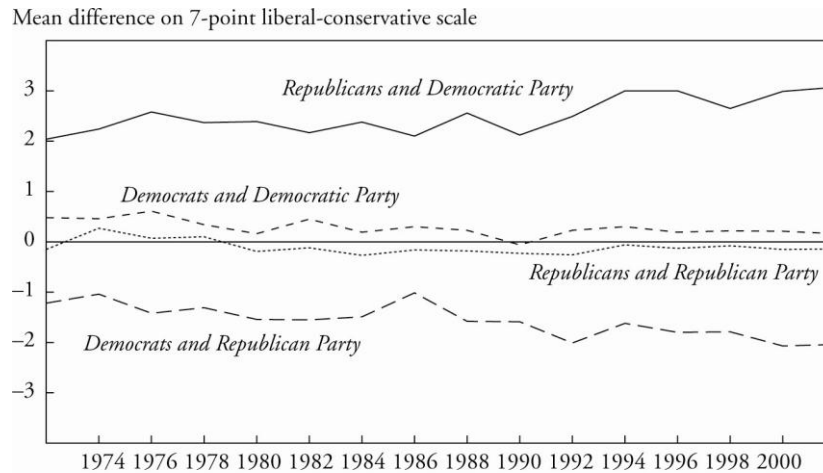
Sources: National Election Studies cumulative data file; DW-nominate scores compiled by Keith T. Poole (voteview.com/dwnomin.htm).

a. The trend in polarization among voters is based on the difference between mean scores of Democratic and Republican identifiers and leaners on the seven-point liberal-conservative scale. The trend in polarization among elites is based on the difference between mean scores of Democratic and Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives on the first dimension DW-nominate scale. Polarization scores from 1972 are used as a baseline for both series.

Source: Abramowitz, "Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?" Reprinted with permission from Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Causes and Consequences of America's Polarized Parties*, p. 81. © 2006, The Brookings Institution.

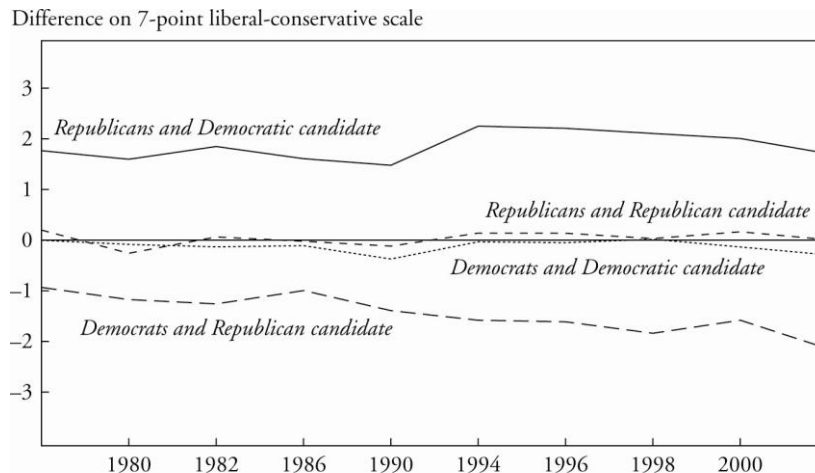
Other evidence points in the same direction. If elected officials were becoming less representative of the electorate, we would expect to find increasing ideological gaps between the people and their parties and candidates. But this has not happened, as Gary Jacobson has shown, this has not happened. On the contrary, as Figures 3a and 3b show, during the past generation, voters believe their party and especially its candidates have tracked their views quite closely.

Fig 3a: Mean Ideological Differences between Partisan Voters and the Two Political Parties, as Measured on a 7-point Liberal-Conservative Scale, 1972 – 2004.



Source: National Election Studies cumulative data file.

Fig 3b: Mean Ideological Differences between Partisans and the Two Political Parties' House of Representatives Candidates, as Measured on a 7-point Liberal-Conservative Scale, 1978 – 2004.



Source: National Election Studies cumulative data file.

Source: Gary C. Jacobson, "Comment." Reprinted with permission from Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, *Red and Blue Nation? Causes and Consequences of America's Polarized Political Parties*, pp. 87-88. © 2006, The Brookings Institution.

However, the gap has widened between voters' views and their perception of the *other* party's ideological orientation. All other things equal, the greater the distance between voters and opposition party candidates, the less cross-party voting there should be. And that is exactly what has happened in the past generation: the percentages of people who identify with Democratic party views voting for Republicans and Republican identifiers voting for Democrats have fallen by about half.

It remains true that less-informed and engaged citizens—voters as well as non-voters—tend to be less polarized than are those who participate regularly and with higher levels of information. Possibly the current level of polarization actively drives lower-information voters out of the process and a less polarized system might both expand and moderate the electorate. In addition, Fiorina and others have argued that those who now participate have shifted their outlook in response to changes at the elite level: if the parties put forward more centrist candidates, the electorate's views would move back toward the center, they suggest.⁶ For example, ideological differences were muted in 1976 when a relatively conservative Democrat, Jimmy Carter, ran against a moderate Republican, incumbent president Gerald Ford. A contest between former New York Governor George Pataki and former Indiana Senator Evan Bayh would evoke a similar response, or so the argument goes. (The improbability that either would receive his party's nomination underscores how much has changed since the 1970s.)

The opposing thesis is that the parties simply have responded to new political opportunities in the electorate. Anecdotal evidence to support this proposition is easily found. As Lyndon Johnson predicted and George Wallace's insurgency demonstrated, the civil rights push of the mid-1960s decoupled many whites from the Democratic party and created the opening for both Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" and his appeal to urban white ethnic voters, whom he termed "the forgotten Americans." The *Roe v. Wade* decision opened the door for a new entente between religious traditionalists—evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics, even Orthodox Jews—and the Republican party. Conversely, the Republican embrace of southern-tinged religious and social conservatism pushed many upscale professionals who were fiscally conservative but socially moderate toward the Democrats. (John Anderson's independent presidential campaign in 1980 was an early sign of their increasing disaffection with the Republican party.) And the inability of the Reagan administration to match tax cuts with spending cuts spurred rising concern about the federal budget deficit, sparking the Perot insurgency in 1992 and influencing Bill Clinton's turn toward fiscal retrenchment in 1993.⁷

Some observers have suggested that members of the "Tea Party" movement represent the latest chapter in this saga of electoral change. It turns out that 74 percent of the Tea Partiers are Republicans or Republican-leaning independents, and 77 percent voted for John McCain in 2008. More than 90 percent are dissatisfied with the way things are going in America; 83 percent believe that government is doing too many things better left to individuals or the private sector; and only 4 percent trust government. They seem unlikely to shift their allegiance toward the Democratic Party in anything like its current incarnation. In the main, they are insurgent, conservative to very conservative Republicans who are trying to move their party back toward the small government

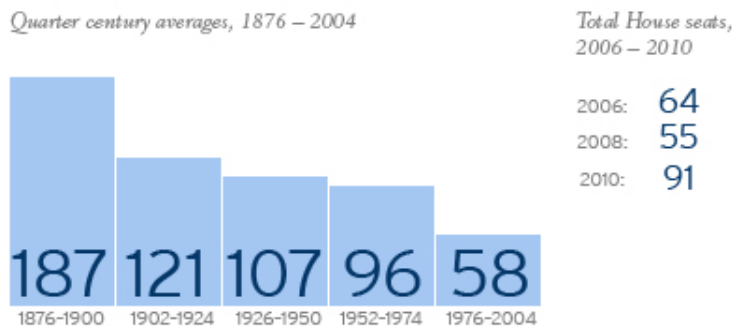
orthodoxy they believe George W. Bush and the Republican congressional majority abandoned between 2001 and 2008. In short, they “are not in a traditional sense swing voters.”⁸

The ideological shifts during the past generation have affected the two parties differently, giving rise to what might be termed “asymmetrical polarization” in the electorate. Republicans became homogeneously conservative, while Democrats remained far more heterogeneous. A recent survey showed that 71 percent of Republican identifiers in the electorate regard themselves as conservative, and almost all the rest say they are moderates. By contrast, 39 percent of those who self-identify as Democrats regard themselves as moderate, 38 percent as liberal and 21 percent as conservative.⁹ But as we have seen, the ideological distance between Democratic candidates and, therefore, elected officials and their constituents has not increased over the past generation and remains small today.¹⁰

Taken together, Democratic-leaning states and congressional districts are almost inevitably more diverse than Republican ones. This means that managing the Democratic coalition will involve more ideological bargaining than is required of their Republican counterparts. For evidence, we need only compare the 2001-2004 Republican unity on tax cuts with Democrats’ differences over *their* signature issue—health care—during the 111th Congress. No doubt the Republican Party became somewhat more diverse as it expanded to regain a House majority in November 2010. Still, it is likely to remain more homogeneous than the Democratic Party unless a large group (Latinos, for example) shifted strongly in its direction.

In any event, party polarization now extends far beyond aggregate statistics at the national level and has rippled through our entire federal system. The most familiar feature of this geographical polarization is the declining number of “marginal” House seats (those decided by a margin of 10 points or less) and the rise in the number of seats where the victor wins 60 percent or more of the two-party vote. Figure 4 shows how, since 1876, the number of House seats decided by small margins has consistently decreased.

Fig. 4: House Seats Decided by Ten Percentage Points or Less



Source: Thomas E. Mann, “Polarizing the House of Representatives,” *Red and Blue Nation?*, p. 69; *New York Times*, “Election 2010”

Fig. 5: Percentage of House Incumbents Winning with at Least 60 Percent of the Major Party Vote, 1956-2010.

1960s average:	64
1970s average:	73
1980s average:	78
1990s average:	71
2000s average:	80
2010:	66

Source: Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress 2008*, Table 2-12 and author's tabulation.

It is often argued that these trends reflect increasingly artful gerrymandering rather than actual polarization. This thesis is exposed to two difficulties. First, recent research has shown that gerrymandering has contributed only modestly to the decline in competitive House races.¹¹ Second, we can observe parallel trends at both the county and state levels, jurisdictions whose boundaries are nearly invariant.

Let's start with counties. In 2004, when George W. Bush defeated John Kerry by less than three percentage points, fully 60 percent of the nation's counties handed supermajorities of 60 percent or more to either Bush or Kerry. In 2000, the closest election in four decades, half the counties delivered supermajorities. The 2004 percentage was exceeded only once in the past half-century, when Richard Nixon routed George McGovern in 1972.

Now the states. To demonstrate the increasing polarization, in Figure 6 I compare three pairs of elections: 2000 and 1960, 2004 and 1976, and 2008 and 1988. While the margin of national victory in each of the pairs is roughly the same, the comparison shows the increased dispersion of states away from the national mean.

Fig 6: Redder Red States, Bluer Blue States.

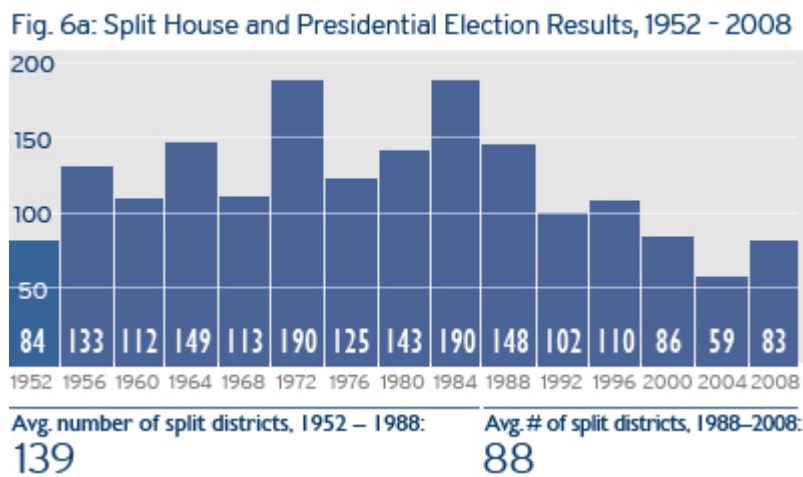
	Winner within 5 points of national margin	Winner outside +/- 5
<i>Cliffhangers</i>		
1960	37	13
2000	21	29
<i>Two-three points</i>		
1976	33	17
2004	18	32

Seven-eight points

1988	26	24
2008	19	31

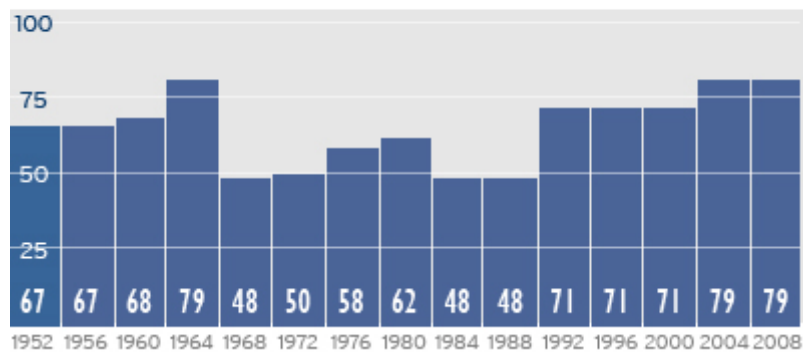
Source: Author's tabulation.

Another dimension of political polarization is the increasing alignment between the outcome of presidential elections on the one hand, and House and Senate elections on the other. As Figures 6a, 6b and 6c show, the number of House districts with split presidential/congressional majorities has declined and the number of Senate races won by candidates from the victorious presidential candidate's party has increased.



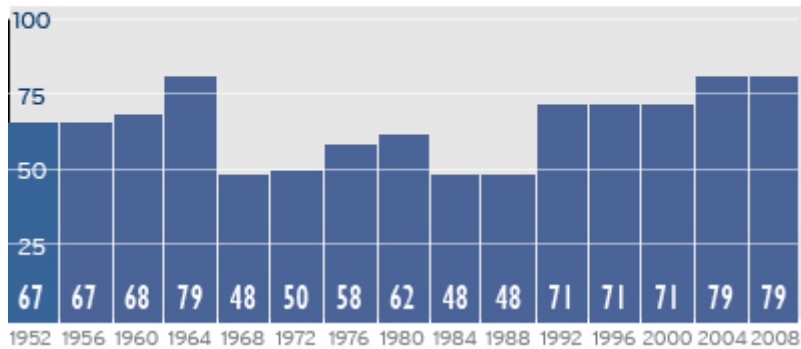
Source: Jacobson, G.C. “Polarized Politics and the 2004 Congressional and Presidential Elections,” *Political Science Quarterly* 120, 2 (2005): 207 and author's tabulation.

Fig. 6b: States Won by the Same Party in Senate and Presidential Elections, 1952 - 2008 (%):



Source: *Ibid.*, p. 208, and author's tabulation.

Fig. 6c: States Won by the Same Party in Senate and Presidential Elections, 1952 - 2008 (%):



Source *Ibid.*, p. 209, and author's tabulation.

Consider one of the many direct consequences of this increased alignment. From the 1960s through the 1980s, nearly 40 percent of House Democrats won their seats in Republican-leaning districts (districts in which the Republican presidential vote exceeded the national average by at least two percentage points). During the 1990s, that figure fell sharply, to just over 20 percent. And by the first decade of the current century, it had fallen further still, to about 15 percent. (By contrast, the comparable figure for Republicans never exceeded 15 percent.)¹² This means that, in circumstances of divided government, each party's representatives will have little political incentive to take the other's positions and arguments seriously. As the two parties' electorates diverge, incentives to cooperate across party lines diminish.

The current polarization is more than two teams jockeying ever more fiercely for political advantage. It reflects, as well, deep public disagreement on matters of substance: cultural issues such as abortion, gay marriage and the role of religion in public life; foreign policy issues, especially those involving the use of force;¹³ and the role of government in economic and social policy. Consider a representative poll finding: When asked, "Which comes closer to your view—A) government should do more to solve problems, or B) government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals?"—Democrats preferred option A by a margin of 72 to 22 percent, while Republicans preferred B, 83 to 15 percent.¹⁴ This helps explain why the Obama administration received almost no Republican support for its economic stimulus proposal and literally none for health reform legislation, why the 2011 debt ceiling debate proved so divisive and why the "supercommittee" was unable to achieve its goal of reducing the long-term budget deficit.

It is possible, of course, to find issues in which the agreement between the parties is more substantial—education, agriculture and aspects of energy policy, among others. But the overall point stands: the two major parties begin with differing premises and typically reach divergent conclusions. These substantive disagreements spill over into procedures and practices that have made it increasingly difficult for Congress to perform its basic duties, let alone confront difficult issues. As a result,

- The budget process is log jammed. Appropriations bills are rarely finished in time for the new fiscal year, and the government lurches from one continuing resolution to the next until it passes a massive “omnibus” bill that hardly anyone voting on it has read.
- The confirmation process for presidential nominees has slowed to a crawl, and many vital positions are unfilled or staffed on a temporary basis. During the 2009 financial crisis, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner was said, with little exaggeration, to be “home alone.” Some nominees withdraw in despair as their confirmations languish, and many highly qualified individuals refuse to subject themselves to the process.¹⁵
- In the House, the centralization of power in the leadership of the two parties has reduced real deliberation in standing committees and allowed the leaders to punish rank-and-file members for defecting from the party line.
- In the Senate, the filibuster—once reserved for the most contentious issues—has become routine, blocking legislative action and preventing elections from resolving disagreements between the parties.
- Serious discussions, or even civil social relations, across party lines are rare. For the most part, the congressional caucuses of the respective parties confront one another as massed armies on the front lines of every contested issue.

What should we do about these two sources of political dysfunction?

Given the foregoing analysis, the “remedies” section of this paper should come as no surprise. We need nothing less than comprehensive reform aimed at making Congress work again *and* at reducing political polarization to more manageable proportions. In recent months, a coalition of Democrats, Republicans and Independents has crafted a menu of feasible congressional reforms (most of which could be implemented through rules changes in the House and Senate) to break gridlock, promote constructive discussion across party lines, and reduce polarization.¹⁶

To break out of the current gridlock, the coalition proposes to:

- stop congressional pay if the appropriations process is not completed by the beginning of the fiscal year and resume it only when all necessary appropriations bills have been passed and sent to the president;
- mandate confirmation or rejection of all presidential nominations within 90 days of being received by the Senate;
- require Senators conducting filibusters to take and hold the floor, and eliminate filibusters that prevent legislation from ever reaching the floor;

- allow bipartisan majorities to bring bills to the floor of the House and Senate over the objections of committees and party leaders; and
- require members to work three five-day weeks out of every four, with coordination of schedules between the House and the Senate.

To promote constructive discussion, the coalition proposes to:

- institute monthly “question periods,” rotating between the House and Senate, that would bring the president face-to-face with members of both parties for televised question-and-answer sessions; and
- require a non-partisan official, such as the comptroller general, to deliver an annual televised address on the nation’s fiscal condition to a joint session of Congress.

And to reduce polarization, the coalition is asking members of Congress to:

- take no pledges except the Pledge of Allegiance and their formal oath of office;
- undertake monthly, off-the-record bipartisan meetings in the House and Senate;
- initiate bipartisan seating for all joint meetings or sessions and for all meetings of committees and subcommittees;
- create a bipartisan congressional leadership committee as a forum for discussing both the upcoming legislative agenda and substantive solutions; and, finally,
- eschew negative campaigning against fellow members of the House or Senate who are running for re-election.

This agenda is only a start, of course. But with the exception of the congressional pay proposal, Congress could adopt it through rules changes at the beginning of the 113th Congress in January 2013. It would make an immediate difference, the extent of which only experience will reveal. Equally important, it will signal to the American people (roughly 90 percent of whom profess little except scorn for Congress) that their elected representatives have received the message and are beginning to respond.

An area of special concern and importance is the congressional budget process, which has broken down completely in recent years. Partisan disagreement has made it impossible to reach timely agreement on the annual appropriations bills that govern discretionary spending. Worse, an ever-increasing share of the budget—comprising mandatory “entitlement” programs and tax expenditures—has been placed on auto-pilot. In recent congressional testimony, Brookings Senior Fellow Alice Rivlin noted that mandatory programs now constitute 55 percent of the total budget, up five-fold from 11 percent in 1974 (the year she became the founding director of the Congressional Budget Office).¹⁷

Not surprisingly, the broken budget process has generated a stream of reform proposals:

- A bipartisan working group convened by Brookings and the Heritage Foundation has proposed five-year budgets for mandatory programs, coupled with enforcement mechanisms to align those programs’ revenues and obligations.¹⁸ While this proposal as drafted covers only entitlement programs, it could be extended to tax expenditures, as well.

- Former Congressional Budget Office (CBO) chief Alice Rivlin advocates a wholesale reform of the congressional committee structure that would eliminate the increasingly meaningless distinction between authorizing and appropriating roles and would remove the major mandatory programs from the jurisdiction of the tax-writing committees.¹⁹
- The Peterson-Pew Commission on Budget Reform has laid out a comprehensive plan to move toward enforceable long-term budgeting and to increase the transparency of the budget process. The commission's objective is to stabilize the burden of debt on U.S. GDP before the end of the current decade.²⁰
- Under the leadership of Chairman Paul Ryan, the House Budget Committee has produced a 10-point plan to reform the budget process. Notably, one of those proposals—to give proposed presidential spending reductions expedited congressional consideration—is cosponsored by Republican Ryan and the committee's ranking member, Democratic Representative Chris Van Hollen.²¹
- In October 2011, Brookings Governance Studies program convened a bipartisan meeting that included three former directors of the Congressional Budget Office, two former chairs of congressional budget and appropriations committees, and a number of distinguished scholars of the budget process. While the final report based on this meeting is still being drafted, participants agreed on three key points: the congressional budget process is indeed broken; the current level of partisan polarization will make it difficult for even the best rules to succeed; but nonetheless, it makes sense to focus on institutional and procedural reform. Several participants cited the bipartisan compromise Budget Enforcement Act of 1990 as an example of process reform that had contributed to better fiscal outcomes for nearly a decade, a view that enjoys scholarly support.²²

However daunting reforming Congress may appear, reducing polarization in *elections* will be even slower and more complex, because electoral reform requires state-by-state legislation. There are some obvious places to start, however. In recent years, a team of scholars led by Brookings and the Hoover Institution has reviewed the evidence on possible electoral reforms. What follows is a sketch of the most promising options.²³

- *States should be encouraged to adopt non-partisan systems for congressional redistricting.* Results from the handful of states that have adopted such systems suggest that they are more likely to yield competitive districts in which the candidates of both parties have incentives to reach out beyond their bases.
- *States also should be encouraged to institute more "open" primaries in which independent voters as well as registered party members can participate.* Here again, the evidence from open primary states indicates, as one might expect, that aspirants for office have incentives to listen to the concerns of voters other than the party faithful. California recently adopted a more open system, and we should carefully monitor its performance.
- *Innovative voting systems such as instant runoff voting (IRV) can give candidates incentives to reach out to the core supporters of other candidates.* In multi-candidate fields, which are typical of the nominating process, the conventional "first past the post" system allows individuals to win by mobilizing a narrow

plurality of fervent supporters. In IRV systems, by contrast, being the second or third choice of another candidate's supporters can prove decisive when no one achieves a first-round majority. Candidates, then, have a reason to reach out and build broad-based coalitions of voters who regard them as acceptable, if not optimal.

- *Expanding the electorate is likely to bring more weakly committed swing voters into the process.* Simple procedural changes, such as same-day registration and timely information about poll hours and locations, can have a significant effect on voter turnout. A more radical approach would ask states to experiment with mandatory voting, a system successful in Australia that has operated with great success since the 1920s.²⁴

There are two principal reasons why the electoral reform agenda is even more challenging than congressional reform: not only do these changes require legislation, but also they must be enacted on a state by state basis. While the Constitution does allow a congressional role in determining the time, place, and manner of elections, it gives the individual states the power to proceed on their own, and constitutional tradition has strengthened the primacy of the states in this domain.

Conclusion

Differences between the political parties—of moral principle and of conceptions about how the world works—are deep-seated, not the least concerning the role of government in the economy. Richard Nixon's declaration in the early 1970s to the effect that "we are all Keynesians now" belongs to a vanished era, as does agreement across party lines during the Eisenhower administration about the importance of increased public investment in education and infrastructure. In this context, it is not to be expected that consensus on the best way of stabilizing our national finances and restarting the engine of vigorous economy growth will be easy to achieve. A party system that can't even agree on the consequences and propriety of unemployment insurance is not likely to yield rapid progress on more complex issues.

The point of reforming Congress and the electoral process is not to eliminate these different viewpoints but rather to strengthen the voices of politicians and citizens more inclined to explore common ground than to retreat to their foxholes. How much difference can institutional and procedural reform make in the face of seemingly intractable controversies? We don't know, and we can't find out unless we try. But given the extreme dysfunction that now characterizes our politics, it's hard to believe that what FDR called "bold, persistent experimentation" can make matters any worse.

Notes and References

¹ Steven Erlanger, “Money Flows, but What Euro Zone Lacks Is Glue,” *The New York Times*, December 1 2011, A11.

² Michael Gerson, “Europe’s Reckoning,” *Washington Post*, December 2 2011, A21.

³ David Autor, “The Polarization of Job Opportunities in the U. S. Labor Market,” Center for American Progress/The Hamilton Project, Washington DC, April 2010.

⁴ See Morris P. Fiorina (with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope), *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), chapter 7.

⁵ Alan I. Abramowitz, “Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?” in *Red and Blue Nation?*, Figure 2-10, p. 78.

⁶ See Fiorina et al, *Culture War?*, pp. 33, 80-88.

⁷ These remarks barely scratch the surface of a many-sided debate over the causes of rising political polarization. For an historical analysis, see William A. Galston and Pietro S. Nivola, “Delineating the Problem,” in *Red and Blue Nation?*, pp. 19-26. For the thesis that political polarization tracks—and to some extent reflects—increasing inequality of income and wealth, see Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge: MIT, 2006).

⁸ Quinnipiac University National Poll, March 24, 2010, available at www.quinnipiac.edu

⁹ Lydia Saad, “Conservatives Finish 2009 as No. 1 Ideological Group,” Gallup, January 7, 2010, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124958/conservatives-finish-2009-no-1-ideological-group.aspx>.

¹⁰ An analysis of the House and Senate over the past two decades indicates that Republicans moved about twice as far to the right during that period as Democrats did to the left. The raw data are available at voteview.com, and the results are on file with the author.

¹¹ For example, see Thomas E. Mann, “Polarizing the House of Representatives: How Much Does Gerrymandering Matter?” *Red and Blue Nation?*, pp. 263-283, and Gary C. Jacobson, “Why Other Sources of Polarization Matter More,” *Red and Blue Nation?*, pp. 284-290.

¹² Jacobson, “Why Other Sources of Polarization Matter More,” Figure, 6-10, p. 289.

¹³ Granted, the past two Democratic presidents have been willing to use force—Clinton in Bosnia, Obama in Afghanistan and against terrorists. Nonetheless, Obama differentiated

himself from Hillary Clinton on Iraq during the Democratic nominating contest, a distinction that may well have been decisive. And congressional Democrats remain far less willing than their Republican counterparts to vote for U.S. military commitments abroad, especially when ground forces are involved.

¹⁴ Quinnipiac National Survey, March 24, 2010

¹⁵ For details and recommendations, some of which (*mirabile dictu*) have been endorsed by the Senate, see E.J. Dionne, Jr. and William A. Galston, “A Half-Empty Government Can’t Govern,” Brookings, December 2010.

¹⁶ This coalition worked under the aegis of a newly formed organization, No Labels. Full disclosure: I’m a charter member and have been actively involved in the development of this agenda, which was made public on December 13, 2011.

¹⁷ Alice Rivlin, “Rescuing the Budget Process,” testimony delivered before the House Budget Committee, September 21, 2011.

¹⁸ “Taking Back Our Fiscal Future,” available at brookings.edu.

¹⁹ Rivlin, “Rescuing the Budget Process.”

²⁰ “Getting Back in the Black,” November 2010, available at www.budgetreform.org.

²¹ House Budget Committee, “Repairing Washington’s Broken Budget Process,” December 7, 2011, available at budget.house.gov.

²² See especially Alan J. Auerbach, “Federal Budget Rules: The US Experience,” Working Paper 14288, available at www.nber.org/papers/w14288.

²³ For deeper discussion and additional options, see Pietro S. Nivola and William A. Galston, “Toward Depolarization,” in Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Volume Two* (Washington, Dc: Brookings, 2008).

²⁴ For evidence and arguments on mandatory voting, see William A. Galston, “Telling Americans to Vote, or Else,” *New York Times Sunday Review*, November 5, 2011.