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Can a Polarized American Party System Be “Healthy”?

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The current Congress—the 111th—is the most ideologically polarized in modern history. In both the House and the Senate, the most conservative Democrat is more liberal than is the most liberal Republican. If one defines the congressional “center” as the overlap between the two parties, the center has disappeared.



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In this *Issues in Governance Studies* paper, Brookings scholar William Galston examines the evolution of the party system and asks whether a polarized party system can be regarded as healthy. Using the definition of political health that the American Political Science Association’s (APSA) Committee on Political Parties embraced in its 1950 report *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*, it seems fair to say there has been what the Committee would regard as progress. The parties have grown more unlike each other, giving the electorate a clear choice between competing programs and principles. Power in Congress is both more centralized and more participatory, as is the presidential nominating process. Parties are more responsible, internally and externally. Largely though not exclusively through the presidential nominating process, parties commit themselves to distinct agendas, and new administrations typically work hard to honor them.

So why, despite these signs of progress, do so many scholars see the current



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system as dysfunctional and perhaps even broken? In two important respects, the evolution of party politics resisted the thrust of the 1950 report: Institutional differences between the House and the Senate tugged against party unity and discipline; and candidate-centered politics increased dramatically at the expense of party elites. In addition to these factors, an overlooked paragraph in the APSA Committee’s report offers a clearer answer for why, despite progress in some areas, our system has become polarized to the point of gridlock.

The Committee stated that “There is no real ideological division in the American electorate, and hence programs of action presented by responsible parties for the voter’s support could hardly be expected to reflect or strive toward such division.” The assumption (or hope) that clarity could be attained without ideology, and responsibility without division, turned out to be an illusion. At the level relevant to real-world politics, it turned out, important policy differences are about ends as well as means, principles as well as techniques. But the problem went even deeper than the return of ideology. The collapse of the postwar consensus—on containing communism as the centerpiece of international policy, on government as the Keynesian manager of the economy, on culture as a sphere of contestation that should remain outside of politics—entailed the loss of shared assumptions. The consequence was the reverse of the “more reasonable discussion of public affairs” the Committee had so confidently expected.

The American Party System

Judged by parliamentary standards, the American party system is bound to appear defective. But despite the undeniable strengths of parliamentary systems, that’s not the right metric. The real question is how well our parties function in a system of horizontal and vertical dispersion of power. The challenge is to develop standards of systemic health that don’t simply encode one’s own political preferences.

In retrospect, it’s clear that the famous mid-century report of the Committee on Political Parties of the APSA, *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*,¹ reflected not just the professional judgments of political scientists, let alone the profession’s long-standing admiration for parliamentary government, but also the pent-up frustrations of progressive New Dealers. Despite his energetic efforts, FDR had not succeeded in welding Democratic factions into a solidly liberal party. On the contrary, after the early wave of progressive legislation, the alliance between northern urban and southern rural Democrats had yielded arithmetic majorities without ideological or programmatic coherence. And when liberals tried to push ahead, conservative Democrats often defected and made common cause with Republicans. Between 1938 and 1950, as Leon Epstein points out, liberals had had little success enacting their agenda. By the time the

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The House is designed to reflect shifts in public sentiment, the Senate to resist them.

APSA report was drafted, liberal Democrats had embraced the widely-held assumption that they could “mobilize an electoral majority, mainly in the northern states, for a party committed to a liberal program.”²

Many thoughtful Republicans shared this assumption. But for them, it was a source of fear rather than hope. In a lecture at Princeton that makes for extraordinary reading in light of what was to come, Thomas Dewey criticized conservative theorists who wanted to “drive all moderates and liberals out of the Republican Party and then have the remainder join forces with the conservative groups of the South. Then they would have everything neatly arranged, indeed. The Democratic Party would be the liberal-to-radical party. The Republican Party would be the conservative-to-reactionary party. The results would be neatly arranged, too. The Republicans would lose every election and the Democrats would win every election.”³ The 1964 election seemed to bear out Dewey’s gloomy prophecy. But he could hardly have anticipated the liberal crack-up that came soon thereafter, let alone the changing racial politics that drove so many southerners into the arms of the Republican Party. By 1980 it was no longer the case that an ideologically conservative party was bound to lose. Nor has it been ever since.

In the fall of 2000, the APSA convened a panel of distinguished political scientists to assess the 1950 report. They found that the party system had evolved in the direction the report had recommended. The two major parties had become less diverse internally and more unlike one another. The public now had a clear choice between competing programs and principles, and more voters were aware of the differences between the parties. The electorate could more reliably predict what the policy consequences of its choices would be. Not surprisingly, the links among partisanship, ideology, and voting patterns had tightened.

The parties had evolved in line with the report at the institutional level as well. In Congress, they had become both more centralized and more responsive to rank and file members. As electoral organizations, they had become far more sophisticated with far greater resources, and they did more to establish and promulgate policy agendas as well as candidate services. And profound changes in rules had made the selection of party nominees at every level, but especially the presidential, far more open and democratic.

In two important respects, however, the evolution of party politics resisted the thrust of the 1950 report. One of these the APSA committee should have anticipated: institutional differences between the House and the Senate tugged against party unity and discipline. The House is majoritarian, the Senate anything but. The House is designed to reflect shifts in public sentiment, the Senate to resist them. These familiar, even trite, distinctions are the basis of the perhaps apocryphal story about the freshman House Democrat who referred to the Republicans as the “enemy.” Young man, replied a veteran legislator, “The Republicans are the opposition. The *Senate* is the enemy.”

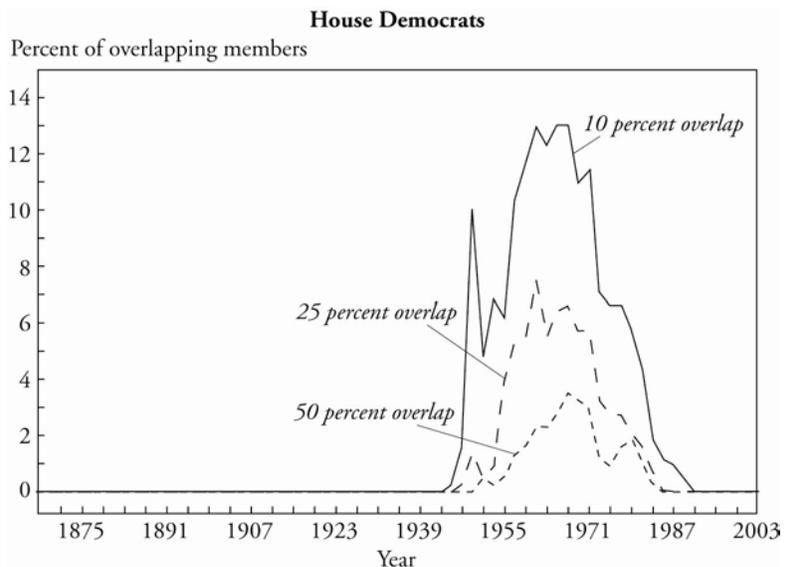
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The other major deviation from the report could not have been foreseen—namely, the explosion of candidate-centered politics at the expense of party elites. Candidates learned how to raise money and staff their campaigns outside the formal party apparatus. Changes in the media enabled savvy candidates to communicate with potential supporters outside party networks. Most important, changes in party rules allowed long-shot contenders to compete and even succeed—the kinds of untested candidates who never would have survived a process that party insiders dominated.

During the first decade of the 21st century, all these trends continued, and many intensified. In particular, differences between the parties turned into outright polarization. The current Congress—the 111th—is the most ideologically polarized in modern history. In both the House and the Senate, the most conservative Democrat is more liberal than is the most liberal Republican. If one defines the congressional “center” as the overlap between the two parties, the center has disappeared.

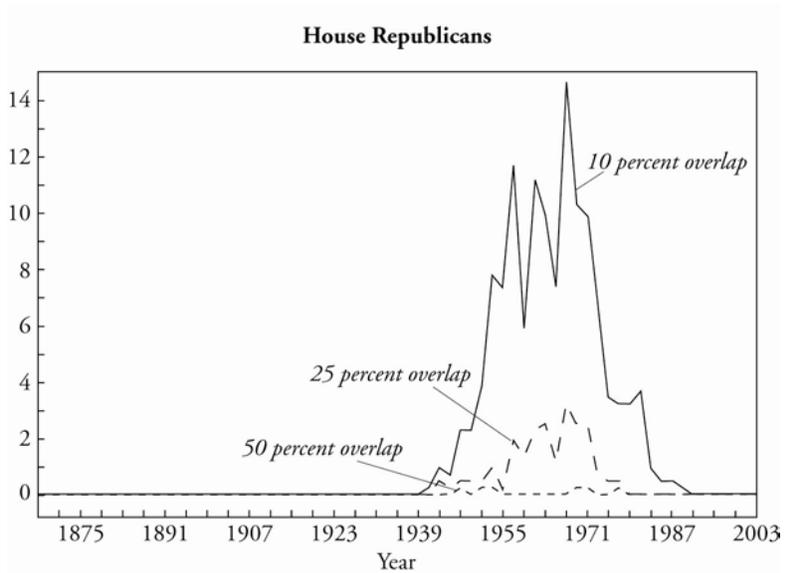
As David Brady and Hahrie Hahn have shown, this situation is not unprecedented. Party polarization in the late 19th and early 20th century was as intense as it is today. In the sweep of American history, one might well argue, the ideologically overlapping and indistinct organizations of the mid-20th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

Figure 1



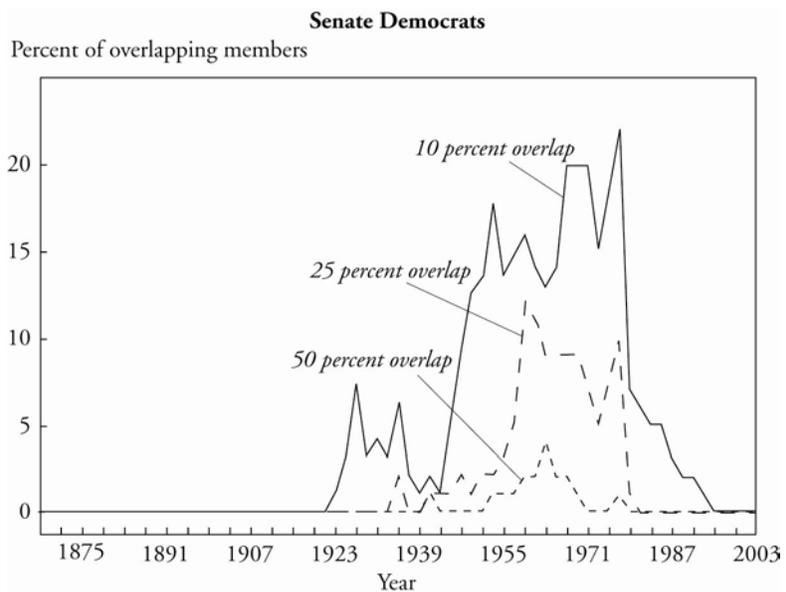
Source: David W. Brady and Hahrie C. Han, “Polarization Then and Now: A Historical Perspective.” Reprinted with permission from Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Volume 1: Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics*, p. 141. © 2006, The Brookings Institution

Figure 2



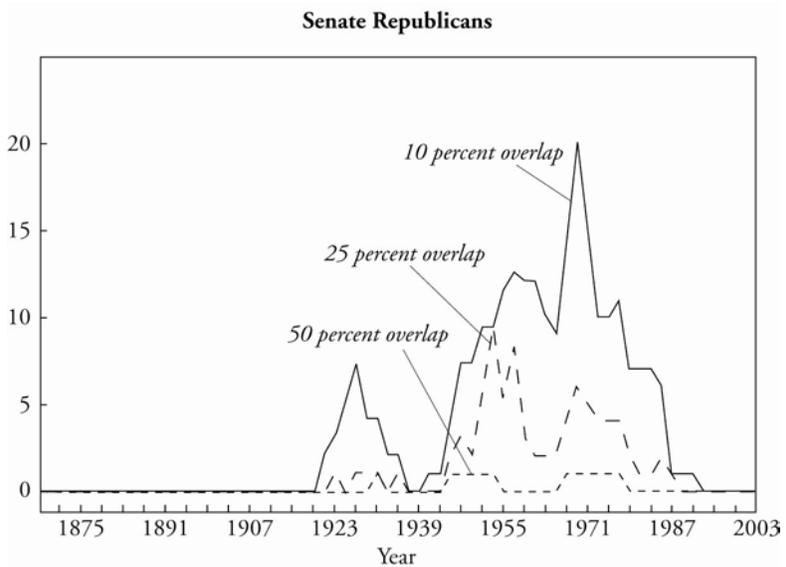
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Figure 3



Source: Brady and Han, "Polarization Then and Now." 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. 142. © 2006, The Brookings Institution

Figure 4



Source: Brady and Han, "Polarization Then and Now." 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. 142. © 2006, The Brookings Institution

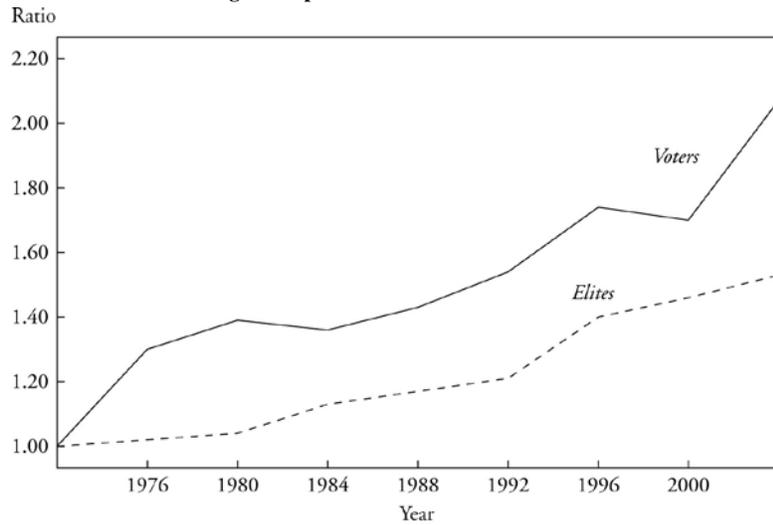
Polarization in the electorate actually rose faster than among elites between 1972 and 2004.

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. But an analysis of National Election Study 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.⁴ Indeed, Abramowitz suggests, polarization in the electorate actually rose faster than among elites between 1972 and 2004.

Figure 5

Ideological Gap between the Electorate and Elites



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.

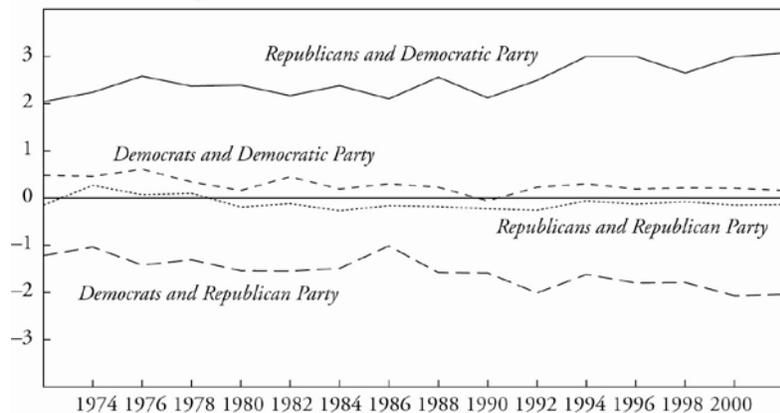
Source: Abramowitz, "Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip? Reprinted with permission from Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Causes and Consequences of America's Polarized Parties*, p. 81. © 2006, The Brookings Institution

Other evidence points in the same direction. If elected officials were becoming less representative of the electorate, we would expect to find that the ideological gap between the people and their representatives has increased. But as Gary Jacobson has shown, this has not happened. On the contrary, voters believe that their party and its elected officials have tracked their views quite closely during the past generation.

Figure 6

Ideological Gap between Voters and Legislative Representatives

Mean difference on 7-point liberal-conservative scale



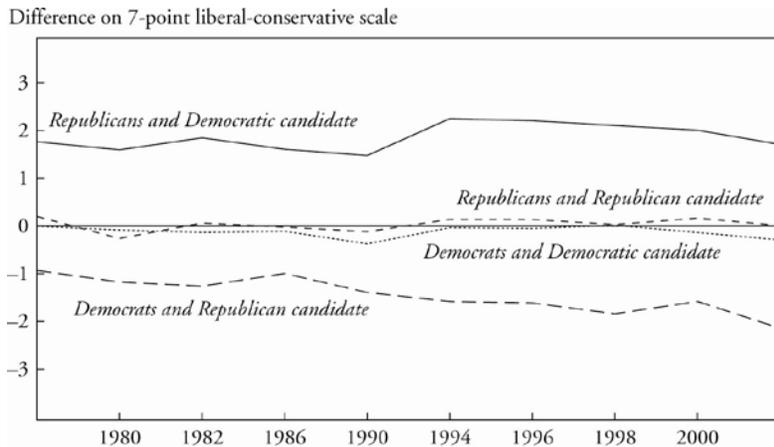
Source: National Election Studies cumulative data file.

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The gap has widened, instead, between voters 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 Democratic identifiers voting for Republicans and Republican identifiers voting for Democrats have fallen by about half.

Figure 7

Cross-Party Trends in Ideological Perceptions



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

The percentages of Democratic identifiers voting for Republicans and Republican identifiers voting for Democrats have fallen by about half.

These correlations have not ended the debate about the dynamics of party change. 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. It is at least possible that the current level of polarization actively drives lower-information voters out of the process and that a less polarized system would both expand and moderate the electorate. In addition, it may be argued, as Fiorina and others have, 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. 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 2012 contest between former New York governor George Pataki and soon-to-be-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. It is not hard to find anecdotal evidence to support this proposition. 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, AKA "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 from 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.

Some observers have suggested that members of the "Tea Party" movement represent the latest chapter in this saga of electoral change. The results of a recent in-depth survey call this thesis into question. 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. Ninety-two 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; only 4 percent trust government. While some of them might be disaffected enough to field independent candidacies, they seem very unlikely to shift their allegiance toward the Democratic party in anything like its current incarnation. In the main, they are insurgent, libertarian-leaning Republicans who are trying to move their party back toward the small government orthodoxy that they see George W. Bush and the Republican congressional majority as having abandoned in the decade just ended. As Peter Brown, the assistant director of the Quinnipiac Polling Institute puts it, "they . . . are not in a traditional sense swing voters."⁵

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 as moderate. By contrast, 39 percent of Democratic identifiers regard themselves as moderate, 38 percent as liberal, and 21 percent as conservative.⁶ But as we have seen, the ideological distance between Democratic elected officials and their constituents has not increased over the past generation and remains very small today.

The implication is irresistible: taken together, Democratic-leaning states and

congressional districts are more diverse than are their Republican counterparts. This means that managing the Democratic coalition will involve more ideological bargaining than is the case with the Republican coalition. 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 current congress. No doubt the Republican Party would become somewhat more diverse if it expanded enough to regain a majority. Still, it is likely to remain more homogenous than the Democratic Party unless a large group (Latinos, for example) were to shift strongly in their direction.

In any event, party polarization now extends far beyond aggregate statistics at the national level. Indeed, it 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 percentage points or less) and the rise in the number of seats where the victor wins 60 percent or more of the two-party vote.

Table 1
Number of House Seats Decided by Ten Percentage Points or Less in Biennial Elections, 1876-2004 (Average by Quarter Century)

1876-1900	187
1902-1924	121
1926-1950	107
1952-1974	96
1976-2004	58
Source: Thomas E. Mann, “Polarizing the House of Representatives,” R&BN, p. 69	

Table 2
Percentage of House Incumbents Winning with at Least 60 Percent of the Major Party Vote, 1956-2008

1956	59	
1958	63	
1960	59	
1962	64	
1964	59	
1966	68	
1968	72	1960s average: 64

Table 2 - Continued
Percentage of House Incumbents Winning With at Least 60 Percent of the Major Party Vote, 1956-2008

1970	70	
1972	78	
1974	66	
1976	72	
1978	78	1970s average: 73
1980	73	
1982	69	
1984	75	
1986	86	
1988	89	1980s average: 78
1990	76	
1992	66	
1994	65	
1996	74	
1998	76	1990s average: 71
2000	77	
2002	85	
2004	82	
2006	81	
2008	75	2000s average: 80
Source: Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, and Michael J. Malbin, <i>Vital Statistics on Congress 2008</i> , Table 2-12 and author's tabulation		

Recent research has shown that gerrymandering has contributed only modestly to the decline in competitive House races.

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.⁷ 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 3 percentage points, a full 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, 50 percent of all counties delivered supermajorities. The 2004 percentage was exceeded only once in the past half-century, when Richard Nixon routed George McGovern in 1972.

Now states. To demonstrate the increasing polarization, 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.

Table 3
Redder Red States, Bluer Blue States

	States won within 5 points of national margin	States won outside +/- 5
<i>Cliffhangers</i>		
1960	37	13
2000	21	29
<i>Two-three points</i>		
1976	33	17
2004	18	32
<i>Seven-eight points</i>		
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 the following three tables 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 president's party has increased.

Table 4
Split House and Presidential Election Results, 1952-2008

1952	84	
1956	133	
1960	112	
1964	149	
1968	113	
1972	190	
1976	125	
1980	143	
1984	190	
1988	148	Average split, 1952-1988: 139

Table 4 - Continued
Split House and Presidential Election Results, 1952-2008

1992	102	
1996	110	
2000	86	
2004	59	
2008	83	Average split, 1992-2008: 88

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

Table 5
States Won by the Same Party in Senate and Presidential Elections,
1952-2008 (%)

1952	67
1956	67
1960	68
1964	79
1968	48
1972	50
1976	58
1980	62
1984	48
1988	48
1992	71
1996	71
2000	71
2004	79
2008	79

Source: Gary C. Jacobson, "Polarized Politics, p. 208 and author's tabulation

Table 6
Senate Seats Held by the Party Winning the State in the Most Recent Presidential Election, 1952-2008 (%)

1952	69
1956	64
1960	59
1964	61
1968	56
1972	41
1976	60
1980	54
1984	52
1988	47
1992	67
1996	63
2000	71
2004	75
2008	78

Source: Jacobson, "Polarized Politics," 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 2 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.)⁸ 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 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; and the role of government in economic and social policy. Consider a representative finding from a recent poll. 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

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B, 83 to 15.⁹ This helps explain why the Obama administration got almost no Republican support for its economic stimulus proposal and literally none for health reform legislation. 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.

So how does this detailed depiction of increasing partisan and ideological polarization bear on the central question: Can a polarized party system be regarded as healthy? To state the obvious, that depends on what one means by “health.”

I begin with an obvious but not trivial methodological point: if political health is a multidimensional concept, there is no reason to believe that every dimension can be maximized simultaneously. Otherwise put, we are all but certain to encounter trade-offs among real political goods. If so, there may not be a single conception of political health that dominates all others. Individuals who share the same qualitative understanding of political goods are likely to disagree about priorities among them, or weights to be attached to them.

With this caveat, let’s begin with the definition of political health that the APSA’s Committee on Political Parties embraced sixty years ago. In the first place, a party system must be *effective*. This requires that “the parties are able to bring forth programs to which they commit themselves and . . . that the parties possess sufficient cohesion to carry out these programs.”¹⁰

Second, said the Committee, parties must be *responsible*—internally, to its members, and externally, to the general public. Internal responsibility means that party platforms and nominations must rest on broad participation among members, at the state and local as well as national levels. External responsibility means that the electorate must be able to see, and to understand, the program each party intends to promote, and it must be able to hold the party in power accountable for enacting that program, to the greatest extent possible.

Third, parties must be *integrated*. Parties must be able both to resist the centrifugal pull of interest groups and to command the loyalty of (and if necessary enforce discipline among) its elected officials.

Finally, and above all, the two major parties must “provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternatives of action.”¹¹ Without meaningful choice, there can be no genuine democracy. And without parties that are internally coherent but externally differentiated, there can be no meaningful choice.

Over the past six decades, it seems fair to say, there has been what the Committee would regard as progress on all these fronts. Largely though not exclusively through the presidential nominating process, parties do commit themselves to distinct agendas, and new administrations typically work hard to

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Power in Congress is both more centralized and more participatory, as is the presidential nominating process. Voters report that they understand more clearly the basic orientation of each party—and the differences between them.

honor them. Elections do matter: George W. Bush’s victory meant that the public could expect—and soon received—significant tax cuts, while Barack Obama’s election meant that government would act assertively to halt economic collapse and restructure the health insurance system.

Parties are certainly more responsible, internally and externally. Power in Congress is both more centralized and more participatory, as is the presidential nominating process. Voters report that they understand more clearly the basic orientation of each party—and the differences between them.¹²

Party integration presents a more mixed picture. On the one hand, party leaders in Congress have more influence over their members, in part because both parties use the seniority system for committee and subcommittee chairs. Members who stray on key votes now run the risk of losing a principal source of power (not to mention campaign contributions). On the other hand, hardly anyone believes that the influence of interest groups within the parties has diminished since 1950. As Jonathan Rauch and others have shown, lobbyists and Washington offices have proliferated.¹³ As the cost of campaigns soars, interest-group money helps lubricate the political machinery. And as laws and regulations proliferate, lobbyists’ specialized knowledge can often drive the political process.

Finally, the political parties present the electorate with a real choice between courses of action, just as the Committee insisted. And combined with other changes in the party system, this electoral choice has a significant impact on governance—an impact that is more transparent and predictable than at any other time in recent decades. As Alan Abramowitz has shown in a splendid book out last month, the combination of increasing distance between the two political parties and increased transparency has boosted political participation and has made our politics far more responsive to what he calls the “engaged public”—those citizens whose level of interest and information most closely conforms to classic democratic norms.¹⁴

So what’s not to like? An overlooked paragraph in the APSA Committee’s report offers a clue. It reads:

Needed clarification of party policy in itself will not cause the parties to differ more fundamentally or more sharply than they have in the past. The contrary is much more likely to be the case. The clarification of party policy may be expected to produce a more reasonable discussion of public affairs, more closely related to the political performance of the parties in their actions rather than their words. Nor is it to be assumed that increasing concern with their programs will cause the parties to erect between themselves an ideological wall. There is no real ideological division in the American electorate, and hence programs of action presented by responsible parties for the voter’s

support could hardly be expected to reflect or strive toward such division.¹⁵

The assumption (or hope) that clarity could be attained without ideology, and responsibility without division, turned out to be an illusion. At the level relevant to real-world politics, it turned out, important policy differences are about ends as well as means, principles as well as techniques. In the 1950s—indeed, as late as the Kennedy administration—it was possible to believe that the era of political ideology had ended, to be replaced by an era of expert administration. But during the decade following Kennedy’s assassination, a steady drumbeat of events—the Goldwater insurgency, the civil rights and feminist movements, the rise of the counter-culture, Vietnam, and Watergate, among others—dispelled the complacent belief in the end of principled contestation.

But the problem went even deeper than the return of ideology. The collapse of the postwar consensus—on containing communism as the centerpiece of international policy, on government as the Keynesian manager of the economy, on culture as a sphere of contestation that should remain outside of politics—entailed the loss of shared assumptions. The consequence was the reverse of the “more reasonable discussion of public affairs” the Committee had so confidently expected. If one party regards as murder what the other calls choice, where is the common language—let alone the civility and mutual respect—that reasonable discussion requires? If one party believes that cuts in marginal income tax rates reduce revenues and the other that they increase revenues, it’s hard to have a reasoned discussion of fiscal policy—especially if one party adopts the position that rate increases are forbidden in all circumstances.

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once commented that while every man is entitled to his own opinion, he is not entitled to his own facts. But the ideological turn in American party politics meant that all too often, each party embraced its own version of reality. It is one thing to say that the 2003 decision to initiate war in Iraq was wrong in principle, quite another to maintain that the 2007 decision to surge troops wasn’t working, long after it had become clear that it was. Ideological polarization, it turned out, meant that rather than being used to test preconceptions, facts were twisted to fit them. So the contemporary system of “responsible” parties turns out to be incompatible with deliberation, one of the requisites of a healthy democracy.

Political polarization also encourages a zero-sum mentality: if they win, we lose. This may be appropriate in a parliamentary system, but it is not well-suited to a system of divided powers that operates in part through non-majoritarian procedures. In such a system, the business of the majority is not only to prevail, and the business of the minority is not only to oppose. The current brand of zero-sum politics makes it difficult for incoming administrations to get their nominees approved, with serious consequences for governance, and it turns

All other things
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instability.

judicial nominations into take-no-prisoners battlegrounds, encouraging the politicization of the branch of government whose legitimacy depends most on its perceived distance from partisan politics.

This extreme polarization also distorts the legislative process. If the majority party seeks only to win, and the opposition party only to resist, then legislative majorities will have to be drawn from only the majority party. To succeed, the leaders of the majority will have to muster, not just majorities, but supermajorities, from their own ranks. This has two implications, neither encouraging. First, small but pivotal factions within the majority caucus will wield disproportionate power. Second, any overall majority that can be assembled will reflect the center of gravity within the majority party, which is likely to be at some remove from the center of gravity in the electorate. While it is true that the left and right tails of the electorate are larger than they once were, its overall ideological shape remains a bell curve. The natural operation of a polarized party system will often leave those in the middle of that curve confused and frustrated.

Even if the majority party manages to enact significant legislation, polarization all but ensures that the battle will continue. The minority party has every incentive to obstruct the law's implementation, and to work for its repeal. It is hard enough for bureaucrats to do their job in a stable policy environment, harder still when political brushfires continue to break out long after the main blaze has been subdued. As for businesses who crave nothing more than a predictable environment for decision-making, the inability of a polarized political system to settle policy disputes definitively is the worst of all worlds. To be sure, not every bipartisan consensus is correct on the merits (consider the long-standing conspiracy of inaction on civil rights legislation), and not every bill passed on a one-party vote will prove vulnerable to partisan attack (consider the bitterly contested Medicare prescription drug provisions). The point is rather that all other things equal, polarization increases policy instability—that is, unless one party is able to maintain a working majority for an extended period.

For the most difficult issues, however, the majority party will be hard-pressed to act on its own. Consider the long-term fiscal crisis that could undermine the U.S. economy. Everybody who has studied the situation knows what will be required to address this problem—substantial cuts in spending, principally through structural changes in Social Security and Medicare, coupled with revenue increases, preferably in the context of fundamental tax reform. To reach agreement, a party that resists anything more than marginal reductions in entitlement benefits will have to find common ground with a party that rejects all revenue increases except those resulting from economic growth. To do so, each party will have to give ground on matters at the core of its agenda. On a much smaller scale, and in less polarized circumstances, this proved possible in 1983 (but only because of the impending bankruptcy of Social Security) and in 1990 (but only at the cost of undermining George H. W. Bush's support within his

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own party). Many pessimists believe that this time around, with the stakes much higher and polarization much deeper, the parties will remain at loggerheads until a genuine debt crisis (such as Greece is now experiencing) makes inaction impossible. And by then, the costs of action will have soared.

There is evidence, finally, that rising polarization is one of the forces contributing to sharply declining trust in government.¹⁶ There is a salutatory degree of mistrust that heightens vigilance against threats to liberty. But some mistrust is so extreme as to threaten our institutions. As James Madison observed in *Federalist* number 55:

As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. *Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.* Were the pictures which have been drawn by the political jealousy of some among us faithful likenesses of the human character, the inference would be that there is not sufficient virtue among us for self-government (italics mine).

Can we honestly say that today's mistrust—between the political parties, and between citizens and their government—remains within Madisonian bounds? Can we judge our party system healthy if it fosters this mistrust? If we knew how to change it, would we choose to perpetuate a situation in which the very process of self-government stands in such disrepute? These are not the questions of an aging academic looking back with nostalgia. They are the concerns of a citizen looking forward with alarm. Our adversaries around the world will never be able to harm us as much as we are now harming ourselves. And if our party system remains as it is, this process of self-destruction will only get worse.

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⁸ Jacobson, "Why Other Sources of Polarization Matter More," Figure, 6-10, p. 289.

⁹ Quinnipiac National Survey, March 24, 2010

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¹¹ *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*, p. 15

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