



PARDEE RAND
GRADUATE SCHOOL

Policy Insight

Polarized Politics and Policy Consequences



Diana Epstein, M.P.P.
Doctoral Fellow



John D. Graham, Ph.D.
Professor & Dean

The subject of polarization is pervasive these days: on the minds of academics and pundits who dissect voter opinions; in newspaper accounts of congressional vitriol; and as the not-so-subtle subtext of media maps that depict a so-called red state–blue state split, to name but three examples. The political parties have grown further apart on ideological grounds, and the potential for compromise on serious problems within our country seems to have diminished. Ordinary Americans are sorting themselves more tightly into parties that align with their core beliefs; and it has become increasingly difficult for candidates to win elections in geographic regions that the other party has traditionally controlled. Ideological concerns are playing an unprecedented role in politics, and activists who are passionate about polarizing issues often define which topics land on the agendas of political leaders. The purpose of this Policy Insight is to review the dimensions, causes, and consequences of political polarization in the United States; to discuss potential remedies; and then to define a future research agenda to help better understand the phenomenon.

Who Is Polarized?

Scholars and the popular press have documented an increasing divide between the two major political parties in the past few decades. In diagnosing and addressing polarization, it is important to determine whether it is a grassroots phenomenon or whether it is primarily a phenomenon of the “political elites,” by which we mean members of Congress, party activists,

and other influential players in the political process. Data indicate its prevalence among political elites. Figure 1 shows the distribution of House members on a standard -1 (liberal) to $+1$ (conservative) scale. Within Congress, the parties have moved further apart ideologically, and there has also been a marked decline in centrists who can bridge the parties and broker crucial compromises.

Evidence of growing political polarization among ordinary American citizens is mixed. The data are difficult to interpret because elite polarization may reflect mass polarization and vice versa. The number of Americans who perceive themselves as moderate has stayed relatively constant over the past three decades, suggesting that most Americans fall in the middle of the ideological spectrum. On the other hand, a significant percentage of the electorate has moved further apart on certain issues. For example, the presidency of George W. Bush and the war in Iraq have produced some of the most extreme levels of polarization between Democrats and Republicans ever recorded in the history of popular polling.

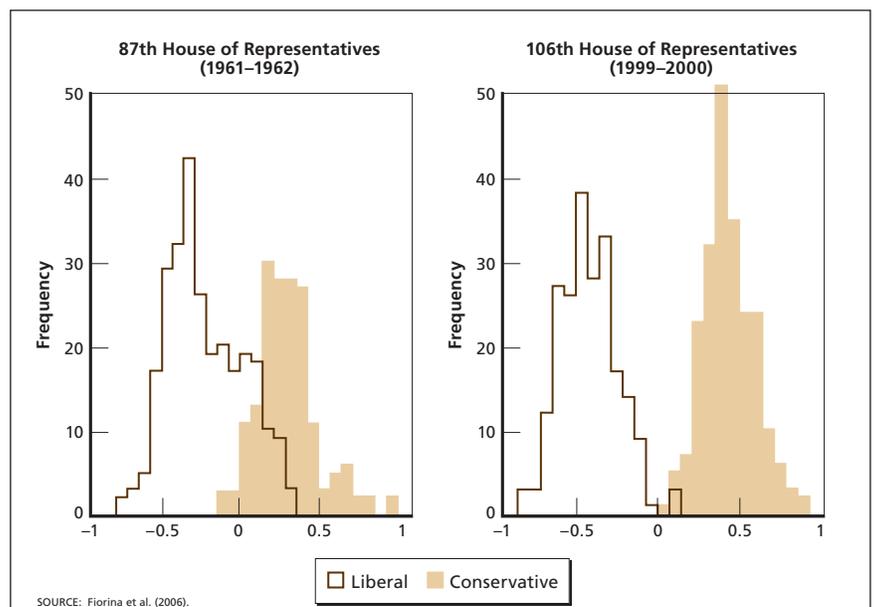


Figure 1. Polarization in Congress from the 1960s to 2000

The Pardee RAND Graduate School is a recognized leader in doctoral education in policy analysis. Using a multidisciplinary approach, students and faculty examine a wide range of policy issues, including health, education, energy, public safety, and national and international security. Graduates pursue careers in universities, think tanks, public service, government, and the private sector. PRGS currently enrolls approximately 90 students, drawn from more than 20 countries around the world.

Beyond dispute, however, is how closely party and ideology have become linked in America. Now more than ever, the two parties represent clear differences in ideologies and policy priorities. Voters tend to associate more strongly with one political party or the other according to their own ideological inclinations, a phenomenon that experts refer to as “sorting.” Whereas liberals and conservatives used to have a place in either party, now one usually finds conservatives aligned with the Republicans and liberals aligned with the Democrats. The result has been a sharp decline in ticket-splitting (voting for candidates of different parties in the same election) and fewer close congressional races (with the exception of those in 2006).

History and Causes

Southern realignment is one of the most potent explanations for polarization. With the sharp decrease in white Southern conservative Democrats and the increase in Southern Republicans, the parties have become more ideologically homogeneous and more concentrated in particular geographic regions of the country. Figure 2 illustrates the

dramatic change in Democratic House seats by region from the 1960s to the 1990s.

The increased influence of party activists is an important cause of polarization as well. These activists—many of whom belong to new interest groups focused on issues of rights or morality—assert a large influence on the selection and election of candidates because of their disproportionate turnout in party primaries and caucuses. In addition, partisan gerrymandering may make congressional districts less competitive and reduce the incentive for safe incumbents to listen to opposing views.

Others suggest that Americans increasingly cluster in like-minded social groups and participate less in heterogeneous institutions and organizations. Residential self-segregation by race and class, facilitated in part by increased mobility, leads to more congressional districts composed of like-minded people. Income inequality and immigration have risen in parallel with polarization, and these economic and social forces may be exacerbating the divide. Each of the parties is now identified with particular economic and fiscal policies, and voter income is closely tied to political party identification. Another key trend is the changing relationship between religion and politics, particularly the political emergence of evangelical Christians with strong links to the Republican party.

In addition, a fragmented media market enables citizens to choose sources of information in line with their prior convictions more than ever before. Fewer people subscribe to newspapers or watch the national network news than in the past, and media companies offer targeted—often adversarial—content in order to gain market share.

Finally, some scholars attribute polarization to a change in institutional behaviors in Congress. The changes include greater power of party leaders to enforce discipline, control the agenda, and determine committee assignments; more usage of restrictive rules; and a decline in meaningful deliberation.

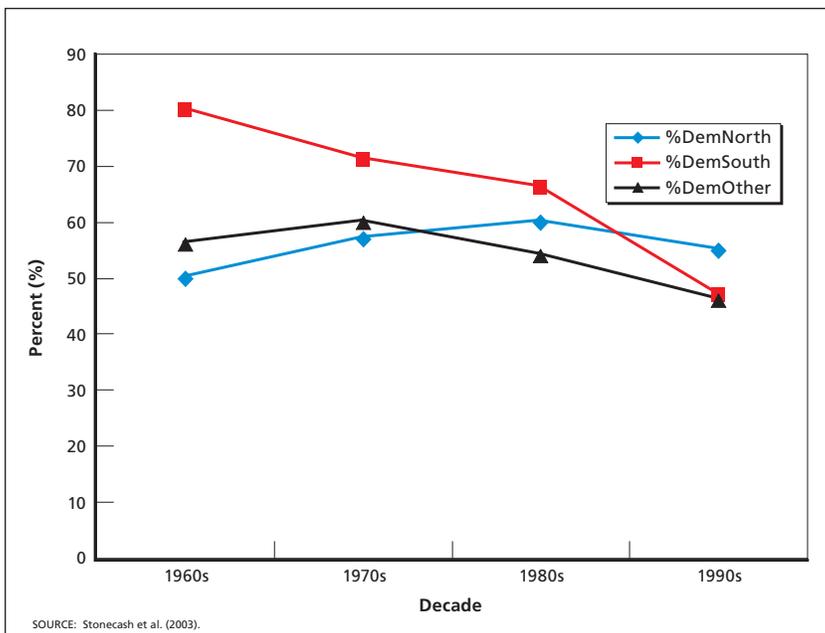


Figure 2. Percentage of House Elections Won by Democrats, by Region

Is Polarization Good or Bad?

This is by no means the peak period of partisan polarization in American history, and our republic has survived many previous bouts. The word “polarization” may connote something bad, but its actual effects on the country are not entirely clear and may include some beneficial, as well as detrimental, consequences.

Polarization probably has some positive effects:

- Strong and distinct parties present clearer options for voters. The two major political parties in the United States used to be criticized for being too similar, but polarized parties offer divergent platforms and messages that voters can better distinguish. Clearer choices may help citizens understand what is at stake in an election, thereby encouraging them to participate in the democratic process.
- Polarization may clarify political mandates and reward (or punish) leaders who deliver (or fail to deliver) on them. If voters know what a candidate stands for, they may be more likely to hold him or her accountable for following through on campaign promises.
- Polarization encourages candidates to differentiate themselves on substantive issues, thereby reducing the relative importance of candidate personality and campaign tactics, and perhaps elevating the role of governing philosophies. Better policy may result from each side vigorously making its case in this way.

On the other hand, polarization probably has negative consequences as well:

- Legislative gridlock—important issues left unresolved in Congress—has risen since the 1940s. Historically, Congress has enacted the majority of significant legislation when it was least polarized. The “gridlock hypothesis” asserts that polarization is a contributing factor to increased legislative gridlock, greater delays in the confirmation of federal judicial nominations, and more vacancies on the bench.
- Polarization may undermine unified U.S. leadership in foreign policy, which could in turn damage our standing in the world.

- Bitter partisan battles may weaken Americans’ confidence in the government’s ability to solve problems.

Future Directions

One of the shortcomings of the growing literature on polarization is that existing studies do not trace the impacts on the day-to-day lives of citizens. In order to move research in this direction, the benchmarks for policy success may need to be modified. The existing literature often uses as a gold standard the policy favored by the median member of Congress or the median voter, presumably because a democracy should not favor extreme views. However, our nation’s history demonstrates that centrist ideology does not always produce the best public policies. We suggest a future research agenda that uses alternative criteria such as economic efficiency and distributional justice to determine policy success.

Of particular concern is that polarization may prevent thoughtful consideration of long-term policy challenges that can be solved only with true bipartisan compromise; examples include the growth of entitlement spending, Social Security solvency, and health care reform. Another example of such a long-term policy challenge is much-needed federal civil service reform. Enacting the recommendations of the 2003 National Commission on the Public Service (also known as the Volcker Commission)—particularly those addressing reorganization, political leadership, and a strengthened civil service—may be impossible until the intense partisan polarization of recent years subsides. If polarization devalues the bureaucracy and the importance of objective policy analysis, then it may slow civil service reform because there is no demand for it, and it may also lessen the impact and usage of fact-based information that the civil service can produce.

As research into the policy consequences of polarization expands, we suggest that some attention be devoted to policy outputs that extend beyond new legislation and budgetary allocations by the federal government. For example, we need

Our nation’s history demonstrates that centrist ideology does not always produce the best public policies. We suggest a future research agenda that uses criteria such as economic efficiency and distributional justice to determine policy success.



a better understanding of how polarization affects the quantity and quality of regulations and judicial decisions. We should also examine the effects of partisan polarization at the state and local levels of government, how polarization is complicating the conduct of defense and foreign policy, and how polarization affects other issue areas.

Finally, we wonder if polarization is shifting policy influence away from objective professional sources and instead to policy shops within ideological think tanks, interest groups, and even the parties themselves. Is it the case that policy issues requiring nuanced technical and economic information are increasingly being resolved on partisan grounds? It may be useful to examine how scientific and policy-analytic information is—or isn't—used and processed differently by decisionmakers in a polarized political environment.

Curbing Polarization

If we decide that it is necessary to reduce polarization, then the solutions may require measures aimed at both elites and the lay public. Moreover, some solutions may reduce polarization per se, while others might only mitigate polarization's adverse consequences. Future research should explore the possible solutions that have been proposed:

- Encourage more centrists to serve in Congress. Methods include reforming the primary process, modifying congressional redistricting procedures, or creating incentives for centrist-like behavior from members who tend to be highly partisan.
- Create a more deliberative process by making congressional procedures amenable to deliberation, or create more bipartisan commissions to tackle the tough, long-term problems that are currently gridlocked and for which neither party wants to assume sole responsibility.
- Increase political participation by moderate citizens, since new blocs of unaffiliated voters can create incentives for candidates to move to the

center. This could be accomplished by increasing voter turnout, capitalizing on our country's demographic trends such as the growing Latino population, and engaging more citizens in local politics and deliberative democracy exercises.

- Reward balanced media coverage in order to alter the influence and tone of the mass media. Possible mechanisms include creating a rating system that scores each outlet on the quality and objectivity of its coverage and investing in civic education so that American schoolchildren are taught to effectively distinguish substance from impassioned nonsense.

Launching research activities to address these questions will not be easy, but we believe that polarization has become a force powerful enough to require some answers. At the same time, we should note, and take comfort in the fact, that the framers of our Constitution designed a political system that has already succeeded in surviving several waves of partisan polarization. We will likely survive this one as well.

Further Reading

- Epstein, Diana, and John D. Graham, *Polarized Politics and Policy Consequences*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-197-PV/EMR, forthcoming.
- Fiorina, Morris P., with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 2nd ed., New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006.
- McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006.
- The National Commission on the Public Service, *Urgent Business for America: Revitalizing the Federal Government for the 21st Century*, 2003. As of July 13, 2007: <http://www3.brookings.edu/gs/cps/volcker/reportfinal.pdf>
- Nivola, Pietro S., and David W. Brady (eds.), *Red and Blue Nation? Vol. 1: Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006.
- Stonecash, Jeffrey M., Mark D. Brewer, and Mack D. Mariani, *Diverging Parties*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003.

Peer Reviewers

Chris Nelson
Senior Political Scientist,
RAND Corporation

Pietro Nivola
Vice President and Director,
Governance Studies,
The Brookings Institution

<http://www.prgs.edu/> RAND publications are available at www.rand.org

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2007