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P A P E R



A House Divided

Polarization and Its Effect
on RAND

James A. Thomson



INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE AND IDEAS

This paper results from the RAND Corporation's continuing program of self-initiated research. Support for such research is provided, in part, by the generosity of RAND's donors and by the fees earned on client-funded research.

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Preface

In this paper, James Thomson, president of the RAND Corporation, discusses political polarization in American history; how one measures polarization; why the United States has become increasingly polarized; the role of independents in the political process; and the effects that ideology and increased partisanship have on debates about public policy. He concludes with a discussion of the steps that RAND is taking to ensure that its objective, nonpartisan research influences the policy debate in today's heated political climate.

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I also want to thank Paul Light and James Q. Wilson for their helpful reviews.

A House Divided: Polarization and Its Effect on RAND

Polarization and RAND

I've been in the public policy analysis business, in one form or another, for 90 percent of my professional life. After a few years in a nuclear physics laboratory, I became a defense analyst at the Pentagon; broadened to national security within a few years; and, when I became the president of the RAND Corporation nearly 20 years ago, ventured into domestic policy. Most of this public policy experience has been focused on Washington, D.C.

It seems to me that, over these 35 years, Washington has become a less analytical and more ideological place. I have felt this trend more in domestic policy than in national security policy, but the latter has not been immune to this trend. Certainly, ideology should play a role in public policy decisions. But I hope that decisionmakers would like to first get the facts on the table and then apply their political skill, which will certainly include their worldview, to make a decision. This is what I feel we have been seeing less and less of over the past three and a half decades.

At RAND, we're essentially in the "what works" business. We help policy- and decisionmakers determine the policies, programs, practices, and processes that will get the desired outcomes at the lowest cost. I think we've established that our analysis is credible and not ideologically driven.

But if some policies are simply off-limits for ideological reasons, then we at RAND are going to have a problem. If our analysis finds that "off-limits" policies are effective or that "within-limits" policies are not, we can sometimes generate significant anger from the groups that want those policies off- or within-limits. I've noticed that it's easier to make people angry than happy, at least when it comes to public policy.

Let me give you a few examples of what I'm talking about:

- Over many years, our work on health policy found that people need to pay for part of their health care or the system will be overused with no additional benefit to health outcomes, except for the very poorest people. In short, free health care is a bad idea.
- Upon analyzing the effectiveness of mandatory minimum sentences for possession of illegal drugs, we discovered that they had little effect on the total consumption of drugs and that alternative policies would be more effective at less cost.
- Our work on the stop-and-frisk practices of the New York City Police Department did not find any overall pattern of racial profiling.
- Analysis of active defenses against ballistic missiles has frequently raised questions about feasibility, effectiveness, and costs.

In most areas of public policy, there are groups that hold ideological positions on one or the other side of the issue, and those groups are frequently influential in one political party or the other: advocates for greater health care access, unions (including teachers' unions), the business community, environmental groups, people concerned about crime, advocates for the poor, the American Civil Liberties Union, arms controllers, strategic defense enthusiasts, etc. All of these groups have been angry with us at times in recent years.

So, is there really a trend here? Or am I simply a crank who thinks everything was better in the old days?

Polarization in American History

From the earliest days of the American republic, going back at least to the debate over the Constitution that began in earnest in 1787, our leaders have been concerned about factionalism, which today we call polarization.

During the debate on the Constitution, the Federalists argued that factionalism should be expected and would even be a good thing if the Constitution encouraged factions to come together in the Congress, deliberate, and reach consensus.

The first quote in Figure 1 is from the Federalist No. 10, the classic statement on factionalism under the Constitution. In short, the Federalists believed that deliberation in the Congress would tame the wild beast of factionalism and turn it to an advantage. People with different viewpoints would be mixed together, find new solutions, and better government would result. Sort of an 18th-century *The Wisdom of Crowds*.¹

Figure 1
Federalists' Belief in Deliberation

Federalist No. 10 (Madison): ". . . that the causes of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its effects.

". . . [the Republic will] refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations."

Anti-Federalist (Cato No. 3): "This unkindred legislature therefore, composed of interests opposite and dissimilar in their nature, will in its exercise, emphatically be, like a house divided against itself."

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The Anti-Federalists argued that deliberation would not work because the far-flung interests of the new nation would not be reconciled. The republic would be divided against itself and sooner or later it would be torn apart, a prescient view given what transpired in 1861.

During the Constitutional Convention, there was a proposal to create a "right to instruct"—the ability of the constituents in congressional districts and the states to instruct their representatives on how to vote. The Federalists opposed this. One of the founders, Roger Sherman, argued that

¹ James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*, New York: Doubleday, 2004.

it would destroy the object of their meeting. I think, when the people have chosen a representative, it is his duty to meet others from the different parts of the Union, and consult, and agree with them on such acts as are for the general benefit of the whole community. If they were to be guided by instructions, there would be no use in deliberation.²

Since the Civil War, the nation has faced many deep crises—economic, political, and foreign—and has not been torn apart. In fact, on critically important issues, policies have frequently been broadly supported. For example, the constancy of American policy during the Cold War is a marvel: From Truman through George H. W. Bush, the United States steadfastly pursued the policy of containment, with wide congressional support. Certainly, there were arguments about the details and numerous disagreements with allies. But the broad scope of the policy and its aims didn't change, even though the parties in control of the White House and Congress did change several times.

How America Divides Itself

Given what I have already said about my personal experience over the past few decades and recognizing the huge challenges the country faces today, it's worth asking whether the nation is capable of deliberation and finding common solutions to the challenges we face now. That question has led me to the literature on political polarization in America. Because this topic can itself be polarizing, I'm going to try to stick to data and stay away from opinions as much as possible.

It's no surprise that the nation should be polarized, in that it is divided into two political groupings. We know from studies of electoral systems that “first past the post,” or plurality, voting, which is what we have, produces two-party systems and makes it hard for third parties to gain a foothold.

Let's first look at how the American electorate divides itself (Figure 2). These data are from the Pew Research Center, which has been polling Americans annually about their party preferences since 1990.³ I would like to be able to look back farther, but I don't have the data. Nevertheless, I suspect that preferences were fairly stable in the 1970s and 1980s, as they were between 1990 and 2008, as shown in the figure. The key change between those two years is that Republican preference dropped by about five points between 2003 and 2007, probably because of the war in Iraq. Most of that drop shifted to one of the middle three bars—that is, to the three different types of independents: the ones who say they lean Democratic or Republican and the ones who say they are truly independent.

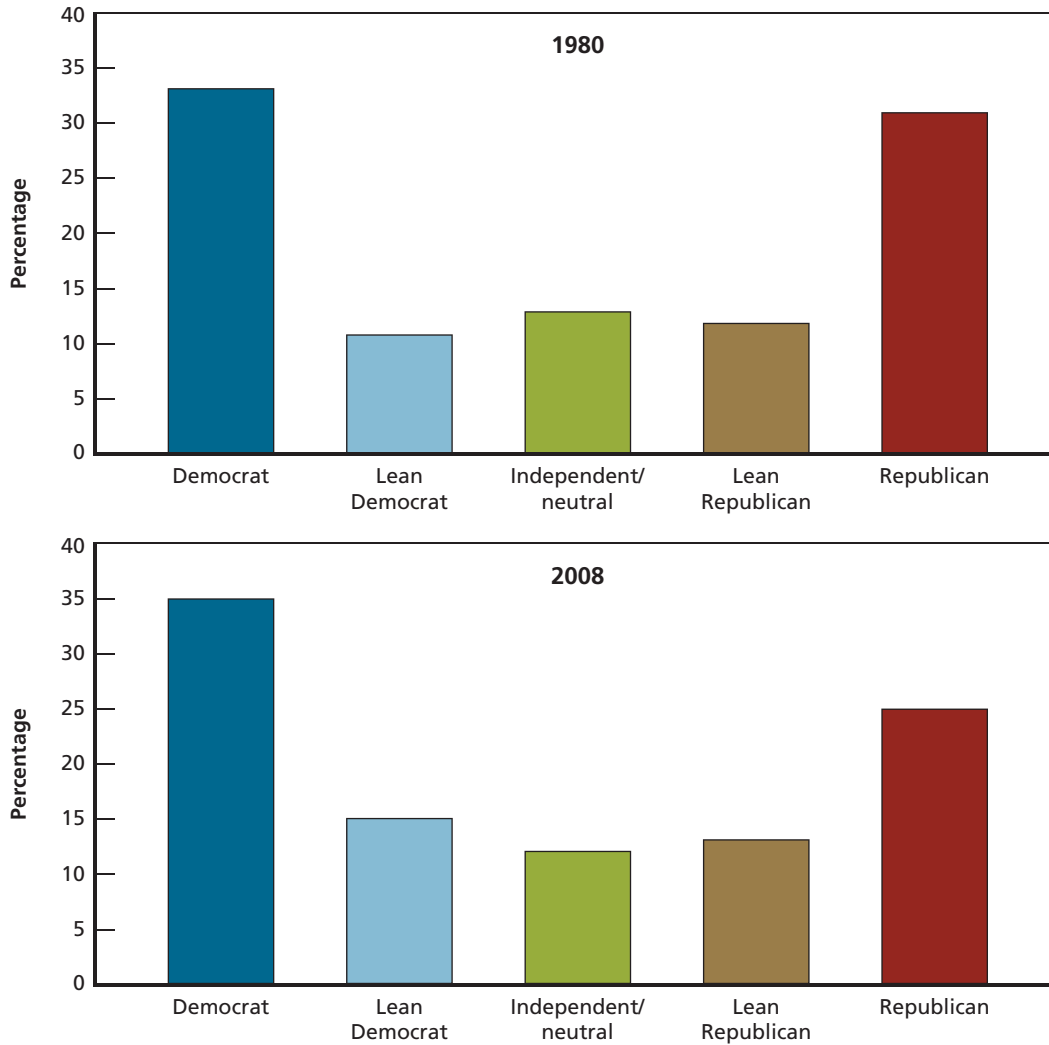
Another way to look at the electorate is by its members' ideological identification. Figure 3 is drawn from an analysis of the seven-item policy scale of the National Election Study (NES) for 2004 for self-identified voters.⁴ The seven policy questions covered such matters as defense,

² Quoted in Bill Bishop with Robert G. Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008, p. 72.

³ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *McCain's Enthusiasm Gap, Obama's Unity Gap: Likely Rise in Voter Turnout Bodes Well for Democrats*, Washington, D.C., July 10, 2008, pp. 85–86. May 2008 responses were used for the 2008 chart.

⁴ Alan I. Abramowitz, “Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?” in Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics, Vol. 1*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006.

Figure 2
Party Preference of American Voters



SOURCE: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008.

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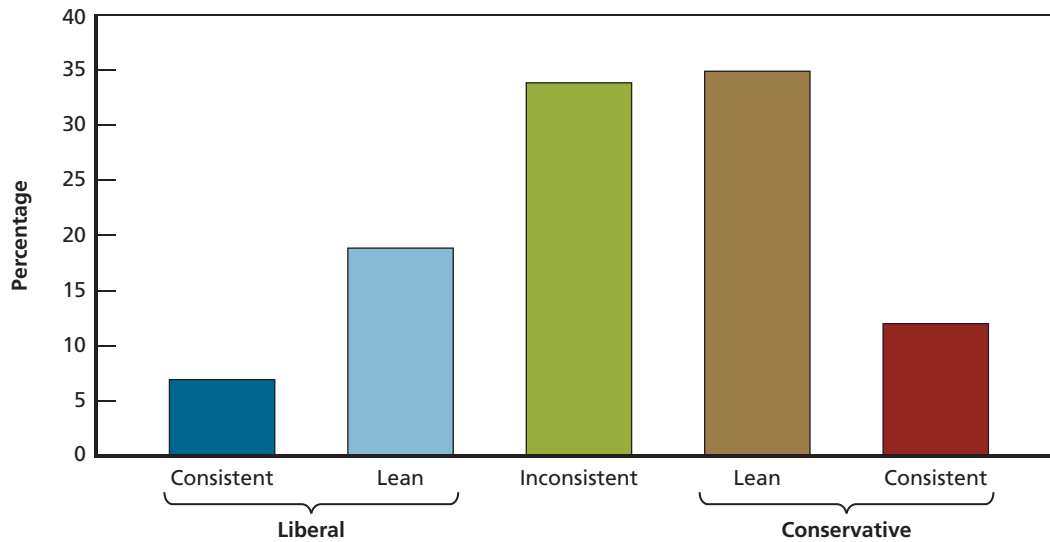
government versus personal responsibility for jobs, and the trade-off between government services and spending. As shown in the figure, the responses were combined into five groups.

You can make your own judgment by looking at Figures 2 and 3. It seems to me that the electorate is not all that polarized: There is a substantial middle ground.

But there have been some important trends. First, ideological preferences have become increasingly correlated with party identification, especially among people who are politically active. Among voters, very few people who would be identified as consistent conservatives by the NES seven-question scale say they are Democrats. The same is true for liberals and Republicans.⁵ This correlation has been growing since at least the early 1970s.

⁵ Abramowitz, 2006.

Figure 3
Ideological Classification of Voters in 2004



SOURCE: Abramowitz, 2006. Used with permission.

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Second, the two parties have become more demographically distinct over the past half century. Another study based on the NES⁶ has shown two strong trends in the second half of the 20th century: All other things being equal, African-Americans are increasingly solidly in the Democratic camp, and high income is increasingly associated with Republican identification. However, there is some evidence that the income trend toward Republican identification halted or reversed in the 1990s. Lesser, but still noteworthy, trends are Southern whites and churchgoers shifting toward the Republicans, and college-educated people moving toward the Democrats. In other words, the two parties have become less demographically diverse, a point to which I will return.

However, what's happening in Washington is more important. Here, there is substantial evidence of growing polarization. How does one measure that?

Measuring Polarization

The classical way to measure polarization is to use interest group ratings. Groups such as the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and the American Conservative Union (ACU) publish ratings of individual House and Senate members based on the positions they have taken on legislation that matters to the groups. There are several problems with this approach, the most obvious being that the groups are cherry-picking the legislation that matters to them and that there might be feedback between the groups and the members—the old problem of the measuring stick disturbing the object being measured.

⁶ See Chapter Three of Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008.

The gold-standard measuring system was devised by two political scientists: Keith Poole, now at the University of California, San Diego, and Howard Rosenthal at New York University.⁷ I have outlined its major facets in Figure 4. Much of what I will say in the following discussion has been drawn from their papers and books, or those of their colleagues.

Figure 4
The DW-NOMINATE Measure

- Statistical analysis of all House and Senate roll call votes since 1789
 - Numerically positions each House and Senate member on a minus/plus scale for each Congress across n dimensions
 - Only two dimensions needed for most of U.S. history
 - One liberal-conservative dimension dominates history and the second (e.g., slavery, bimetallism, civil rights) is now no longer important
 - Permits comparisons across time
 - Individuals do not move much
 - Polarization is the difference between the average scores of the two major parties on the first dimension
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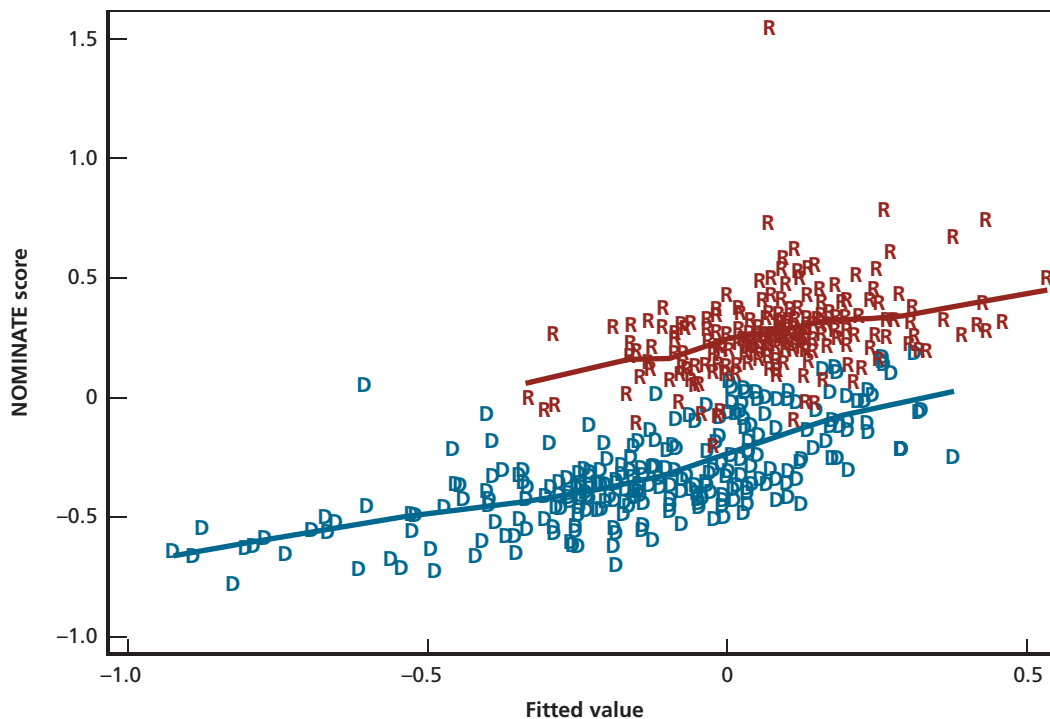
The principle behind their method is straightforward, but the execution is complex. The words behind the acronym DW-NOMINATE demonstrate the point: Dynamic Weighted Nominal Three Step Estimation. This is a geometric (spatial) model of voting behavior. I won't go into the methodology underlying DW-NOMINATE in any detail now, although some additional detail is in the appendix. But you need to know three key points:

- DW-NOMINATE is a study of all roll call votes in both the Senate and House since 1789, except for those that were unanimous or nearly unanimous. There have been about 100,000 such votes.
- For each biennial Congress, DW-NOMINATE positions each member on a minus/plus scale across n dimensions. One uses as many dimensions as one needs in order to get a good fit of the data. It turns out that only two dimensions are needed to describe voting for most of American history, and since about 1970, one dimension has been sufficient. Across history, that first dimension has been about economics, specifically about the role of the state in the economy. The second dimension has mostly been concerned with regional divisions, such as slavery.
- The method permits comparisons of individuals and of parties across time. It's possible to observe the political journey of a group, such as Southern Democrats, or of an individual member, such as Wayne Morse, who traveled from the center to the far left over his career. But it turns out that there are very few members who make a journey like his. The scores for most members (on the first dimension) change little during their careers.

⁷ Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Ideology & Congress*, New Brunswick, Conn.: Transaction Publishers, 2007; Keith T. Poole, *Spatial Models of Parliamentary Voting*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

With those points in mind, let's look at some results.⁸ Figure 5 shows the 93rd House, which was elected when President Richard Nixon was reelected. Let's concentrate on the y-axis in this figure, which displays the NOMINATE score for that dominant first dimension. I'm not going to discuss the x-axis or the black lines. As you can see, there is a significant amount of mixing of Rs and Ds. Some Ds have a higher (i.e., a more politically conservative) score than many Rs, and vice versa.

Figure 5
NOMINATE Versus District Characteristics, 1973



SOURCE: McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006.
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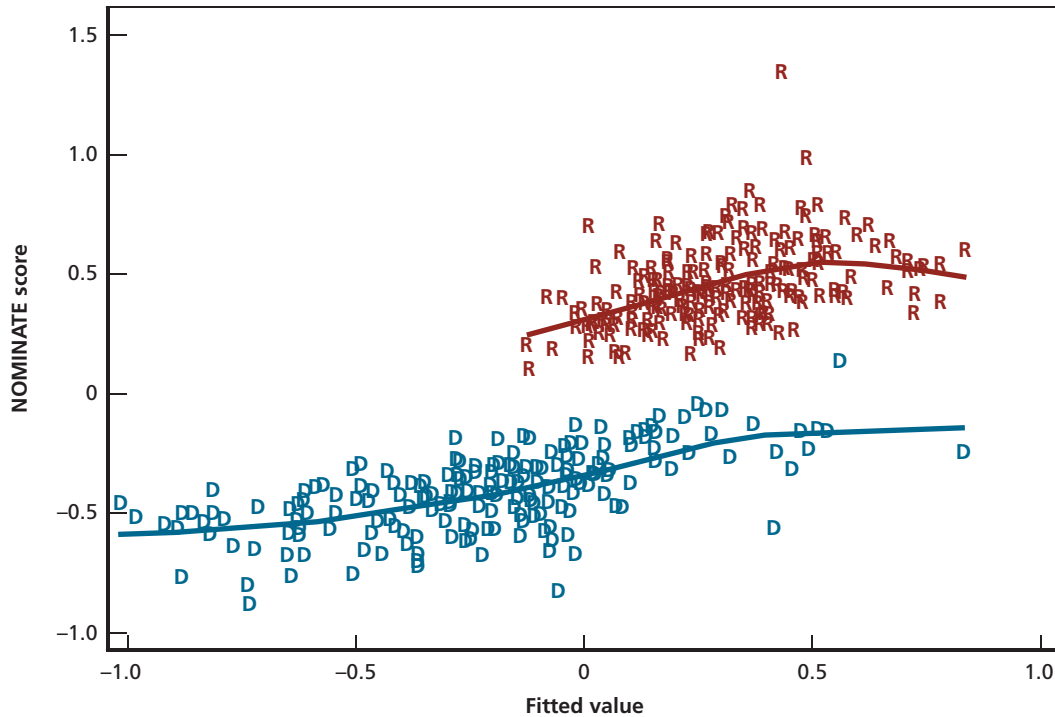
This, of course, was the time when George Wallace claimed that there wasn't "a dime's worth of difference" between the parties. Well, there was a difference, and we can measure it by taking the difference between the average of the NOMINATE scores for the two parties, which turns out to be 0.55. This is an index of the polarization between the parties. Keep that number in mind, 0.55.

In Figure 6, I've turned the clock forward to the Congress elected in 2003.⁹ The obvious point is that the parties have pulled apart. In the plot in this figure, there is only one R with roughly the same score as one D. Otherwise, there is no mixing. In fact, the R with the lowest score (i.e., the most liberal) was Jim Leach of Iowa, who was defeated in the 2006 election, and

⁸ Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, "Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?" Working Paper, February 19, 2006.

⁹ McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006.

Figure 6
NOMINATE Versus District Characteristics, 2003



SOURCE: McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006.

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the D was Ralph Hall of Texas, who has since switched parties. The difference between the average scores of the two parties, the index of polarization, has grown to a bit more than 0.9. Remember that in 1973 it was 0.55. For the 2007 Congress, there was no mixing at all in either the House or the Senate. The two parties have pulled completely apart.¹⁰

Figure 7 demonstrates that point. I've now rotated the NOMINATE score onto the x-axis and show the distributions of the scores for three different Houses.¹¹ You can see that back in the 1960s and into the late 1980s, the Democrats had a sizable right wing. The Republicans had a less sizable, but still noticeable, left wing. Those wings are gone. Said another way, moderates have virtually disappeared.

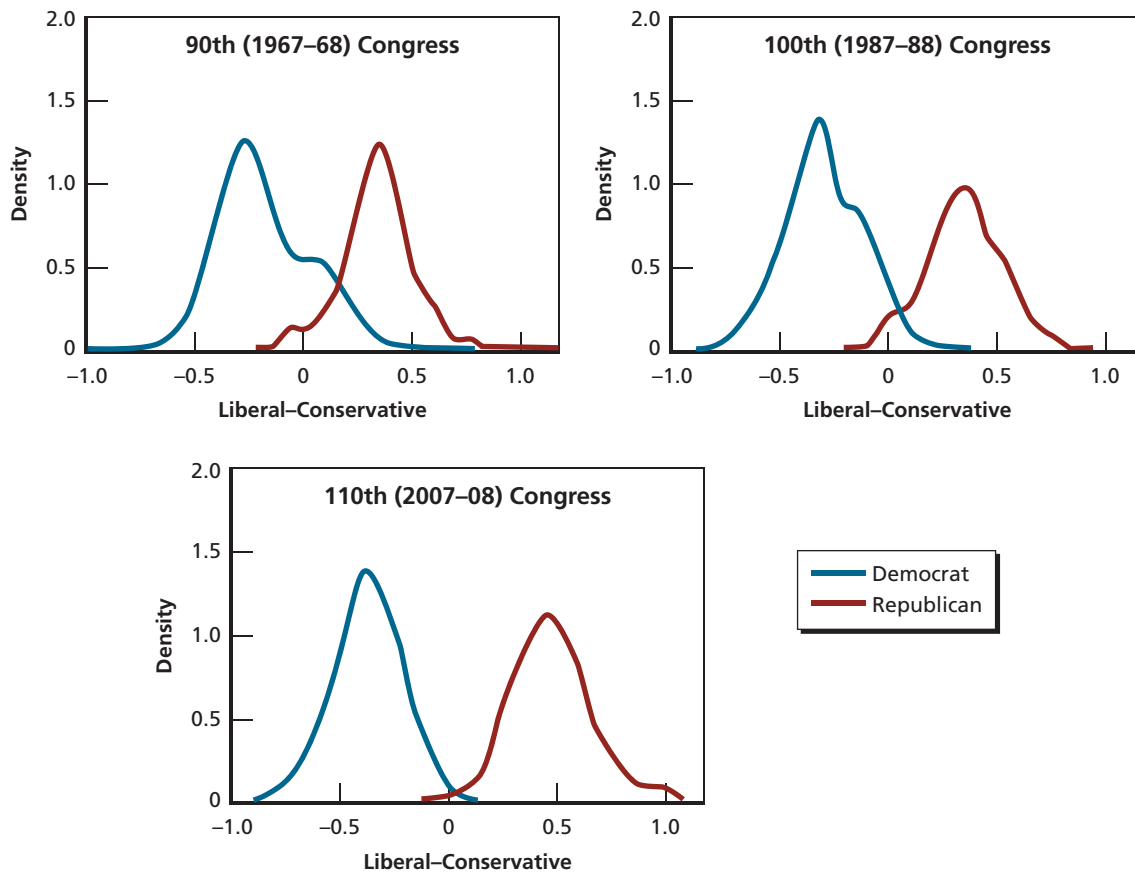
As a curiosity and perhaps a demonstration of the validity of this method, it's worth noting that, according to the NOMINATE scores for the last Congress, the five leftmost Republican senators in the 110th Congress were Olympia Snowe, Susan Collins, Gordon Smith, Norm Coleman, and Arlen Specter.¹² Smith and Coleman were defeated in November 2008. Snowe, Collins, and Specter were the Republicans who joined the Democrats to get the

¹⁰ See ranking of 110th Congress on Poole and Rosenthal's "Voteview" Web site.

¹¹ Royce Carroll, Jeff Lewis, James Lo, Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, "Who Is More Liberal, Senator Obama or Senator Clinton?" Working Paper, April 18, 2008.

¹² See ranking of 110th Congress on Poole and Rosenthal's "Voteview" Web site.

Figure 7
Polarization in 90th, 100th, and 110th Congresses



SOURCE: Carroll et al., 2008.

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needed 60 votes in the Senate for the President Barack Obama's stimulus bill. Specter has now switched parties.

Figure 8 displays the index of polarization from 1879 to 2007 for both houses of Congress.¹³ The level of polarization has reached even higher levels in the 110th Congress.¹⁴

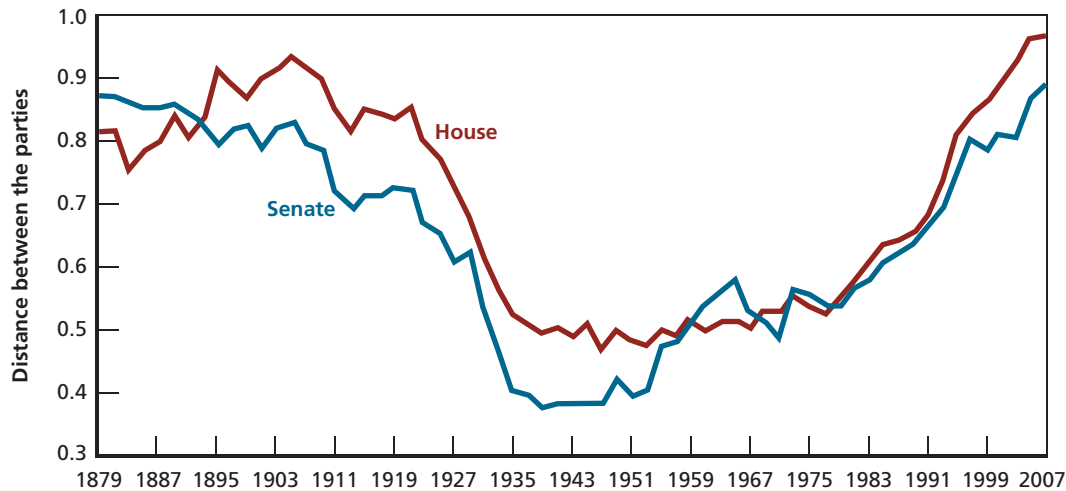
There was a high level of polarization in the last part of the 19th century. It began to decline at the beginning of the 20th century and continued declining until hitting lows in the 1930s. It remained at low levels until the early 1970s, when it started to rise.

From the late 19th century to the mid-1970s, the Republican score drifted downward—i.e., toward the political left on the first dimension. The Democrats drifted to the right. The key shift among the Democrats, however, was among the Southerners. They were to the left of the Northern Democrats on the first dimension at the beginning of the 20th century. But they abandoned economic populism during this period and became more economically con-

¹³ See “Party Polarization: 1879–2009” on McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal’s “Polarized America” Web site.

¹⁴ Carroll et al., 2008.

Figure 8
Party Polarization, 1879–2007



SOURCE: McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, "Polarized America" Web site, no date.

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servative. This shift stopped only when Democrats started to be replaced by Republicans in the South and the remaining Southern Democrats started looking more like Northern Democrats.

From the mid-1970s until today, the Republican first-dimension score rose from 0.25 to 0.55 in the House, and the Democratic score went from -0.3 to -0.4 , bringing the polarization index from 0.55 to 0.95. In other words, the polarization index had increased by 0.4, with the Republicans contributing 0.3 and the Democrats 0.1.¹⁵

With the end of the debates over civil rights, voting in Congress became almost totally dominated by the first dimension. Voting on other issues is now aligned with the economic dimension.¹⁶

As indicated by Figure 9, the first dimension now encompasses a broad set of issues. The "lifestyle" issues still have a small amount of regional flavor to them, but mainly fit on the liberal-conservative scale.

It is not clear to me at all why political positions on all these issues should be aligned. What underlying philosophy ties them together? I understand the underlying philosophy regarding the government's role in the economy, but I don't understand how it connects, for example, to abortion or to religion in the schools. Why should I be able to predict with confidence that someone who wants to expand government-provided health care will also be in favor of rehabilitation, as opposed to punishment, of criminals and of negotiating with Iran over its nuclear program rather than threatening a military strike? Or why should I be able to predict the opposite? But I can. I won't always be right, but I'll be right often enough to make a lot of money on even-odds bets.

¹⁵ Keith T. Poole, "The Roots of the Polarization of Modern U.S. Politics," *Revista de ciencia política* (Santiago), Vol. 28, No. 2, December 2008.

¹⁶ Poole, 2008.

Figure 9
Polarization’s Effect on Public Policy

- The role of government in the economy
 - Welfare programs: Social Security, other safety nets
 - Health care
 - Taxation
 - Regulation: markets, commerce, workplace, environment
 - Infrastructure
 - Education (e.g., privatization, choice, accountability)
 - “Lifestyle”: Abortion, guns, gay rights, religion
 - Immigration
 - Crime and punishment
 - National security
 - War and peace
 - Role of military force
 - Threat assessment
 - Role of allies
- RAND OP291-9

Some observers have attributed this alignment of disconnected issues to tribal behavior. Each tribe has developed its own creed, and it’s the opposite of the other creed. There are the believers and then there are the others. As Senator Lindsey Graham put it,

You are one team versus the other and never shall the twain meet. If it’s a Democratic idea, I have to be against it because it came from a Democrat. And vice versa.¹⁷

When he left Congress, Richard Gephardt put it this way:

You are either in the blue team or the red team, and you never wander off. . . . I never thought about it that much when I came, but it was very different then. . . . [P]eople wandered off their side and voted in committee or on the floor with the other side. There was this understanding that we were there to solve problems.¹⁸

Explaining the Growth of Polarization

The Geographic Sorting of Voters

What explains the growth of polarization over the past 35 years? A principal reason appears to be geographic sorting of voters. Over time, communities and regions of the country have become more homogeneous—politically, ideologically, demographically, and in terms of “way of life.” Thus, the constituencies in congressional districts and in states have been changing their political outlooks. Some House or Senate members, whose views mostly do not change much over time, get out of step with their constituents’ views. When these members lose a

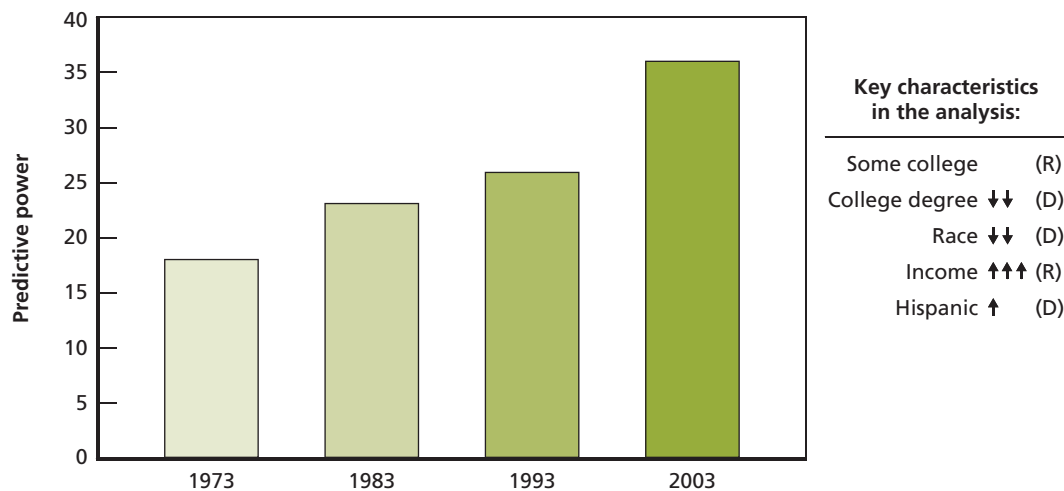
¹⁷ Quoted in Ronald Brownstein, *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America*, New York: Penguin Press, 2007, p. 12.

¹⁸ Brownstein, p. 12.

reelection fight or retire, they tend to be replaced by someone whose views are more in step with those of their constituents. For example, in Oklahoma, when the somewhat conservative Democratic Senator David Boren retired, he was succeeded by the more conservative Republican Senator James Inhofe. Occasionally they switch parties, like Representative Hall or Senator Specter. These constituency effects have been growing since the mid-1970s.

Figure 10 summarizes the results of an analysis of the effects of the demographics of each congressional district on the NOMINATE score of the member who represents that district.¹⁹ The demographic variables are education, race, ethnicity, and income. The left half of the figure shows a statistician's measurement of how well the model with these variables does in explaining the 434 scores for each House. As the figure shows, in 1973 the model could explain 18 percent. By 2003, the predictive (i.e., the explanatory) power was 36 percent, or twice as good.

Figure 10
Growth of Constituency Characteristics



SOURCE: McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2008.
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The key points are that even a fairly limited set of demographic variables does a reasonably good job of predicting NOMINATE scores and that demography is increasingly important in predicting the scores, and thus the voting behavior, of the representatives.

The table on the right side of Figure 10 lists in parentheses the party favored by the variable in the 2003 analysis. So, for example, the greater the percentage of constituents with some college education (and no college degree), the more likely the district's House member would be Republican (i.e., have a positive score), designated in the figure by an *R*.

The arrows indicate the trends from 1973 to 2003; up means that the trend is favoring Republicans and down Democrats. The number of arrows shows the strength of the trend. So, for example, there has been no trend at all on the "some college" variable, but the "college degree" variable has been trending Democratic and doing so moderately strongly.

I stated earlier that demographic variables are also increasingly important in predicting the party preferences of individuals and that the parties have become more homogeneous demographically and ideologically.

¹⁹ See Chapter Two in McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2008.

Why have the constituency effects become more important? In *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing produce statistical evidence to support their argument that migration—the movement of people into communities and regions and out of them—is producing communities that are increasingly homogeneous in terms of education, race, income, and way of life.²⁰ As they choose new communities, people seek out places with people like them. At the level of congressional districts, we have just seen the effects of education, race, and income.

But they make the argument that the homogeneity is also determined by “way of life” variables, of which one of the more important could be religion, especially attachment (or not) to traditionalist religious groups. Pastor Rick Warren said that he thought that 85 percent of his flock voted for George W. Bush in 2004, saying, “Hey, it’s Orange County.” Warren over-estimated—Orange County voted only 60 percent for Bush²¹—but the study of the party identification of individuals, which I described earlier,²² supports the hypothesis that religion is important: Church attendance is increasingly associated with Republican identification.

Bishop argues that other “way of life” variables are important too. People are attracted to communities that offer them things they like, such as bike paths, high-end coffee shops, good hunting, gun shops, golf courses, etc.

It is possible that clustering of voters around these “way of life” variables is the deeper reason (the “hidden variables”) for the geographic sorting of individuals along demographic lines. In other words, it could be that the stronger causal link is between the “way of life” of constituents and the voting behavior of their representatives. However, this hypothesis remains to be tested empirically.

There is plenty of research that demonstrates that association only with like-minded people produces groupthink and poor decisions. People in homogeneous groups become unaware that there could be acceptable alternatives to their own ideas. Thus, the late playwright Arthur Miller’s remark on the eve of the 2004 election has probably been repeated in one way or another countless times: “How can the polls be neck and neck when I don’t know one Bush supporter?”²³

County Voting Patterns

Unfortunately, I don’t have data that would permit an examination of the effects of sorting on voting at the community level. The best we can do is to examine voting at the county level. There are more than 3,000 counties in the United States, compared with 435 congressional districts. On average, county voting is finer-grained than congressional district voting. The average county has one-seventh the population of a congressional district. But some counties are very large. For example, Los Angeles County has the population of roughly 14 congressional districts. The comparison of how counties voted in the 1976 and 2008 presidential elections provides some evidence for geographic sorting of voters.

Figure 11 is a map of the 1976 U.S. presidential election. The areas in black show counties that voted for Jimmy Carter by a landslide, and the gray areas show Gerald Ford landslide counties.²⁴ Landslide counties are those that a presidential candidate won by more than 20

²⁰ Bishop, 2008.

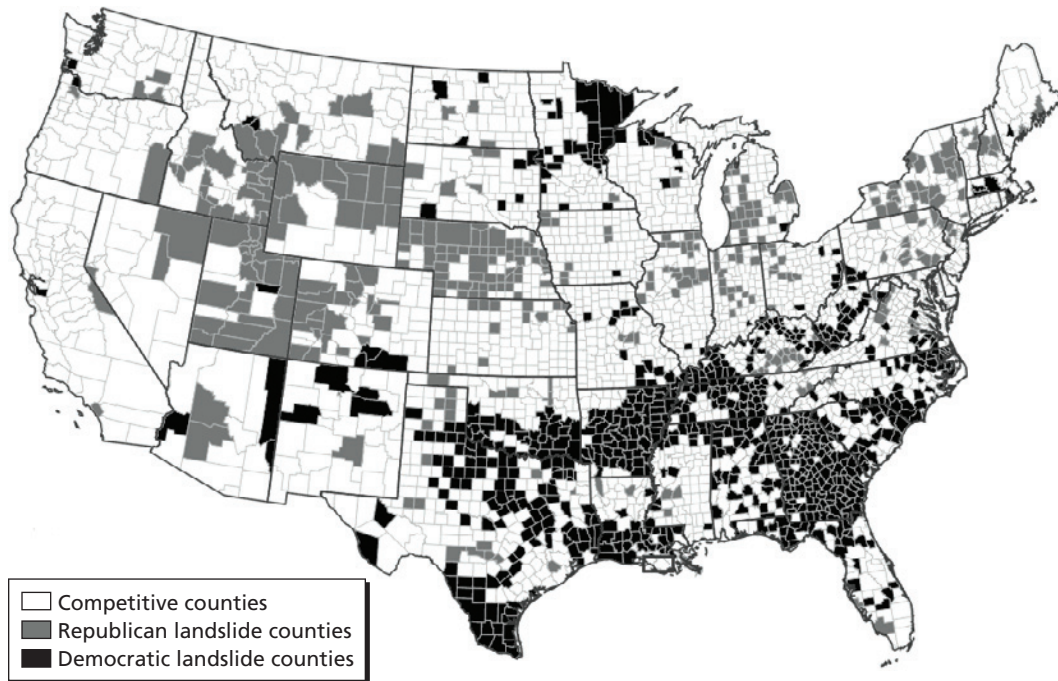
²¹ Bishop, 2008, p. 178.

²² Chapter Three in McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2008.

²³ Bishop, 2008, p. 19.

²⁴ Bishop, 2008, p. 10.

Figure 11
1976 U.S. Election, by County



SOURCE: Bishop, 2008. Used with permission.
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percent. You can see that there is a lot of white on this map, indicating non-landslide, or “competitive,” counties. Some states, such as California, are almost entirely white.

Figure 12 shows a similar map for the 2008 election.²⁵ It depicts a completely different picture. The Democratic domination of the South has disappeared and been replaced by numerous Republican landslide counties. McCain dominated the rural areas, and Obama took most cities. It’s worth noting that the two largest counties in the United States—Los Angeles and Cook counties—were landslide Obama counties. The number of landslide counties has grown and the number of competitive counties has declined, sharply.

Here are two other ways to look at this.²⁶

Figure 13 shows that the number of landslide counties has grown, especially in competitive elections—the left-hand column—and especially since 1976. Competitive elections are ones in which the winning candidate won by less than 10 percent of the popular vote nationwide.

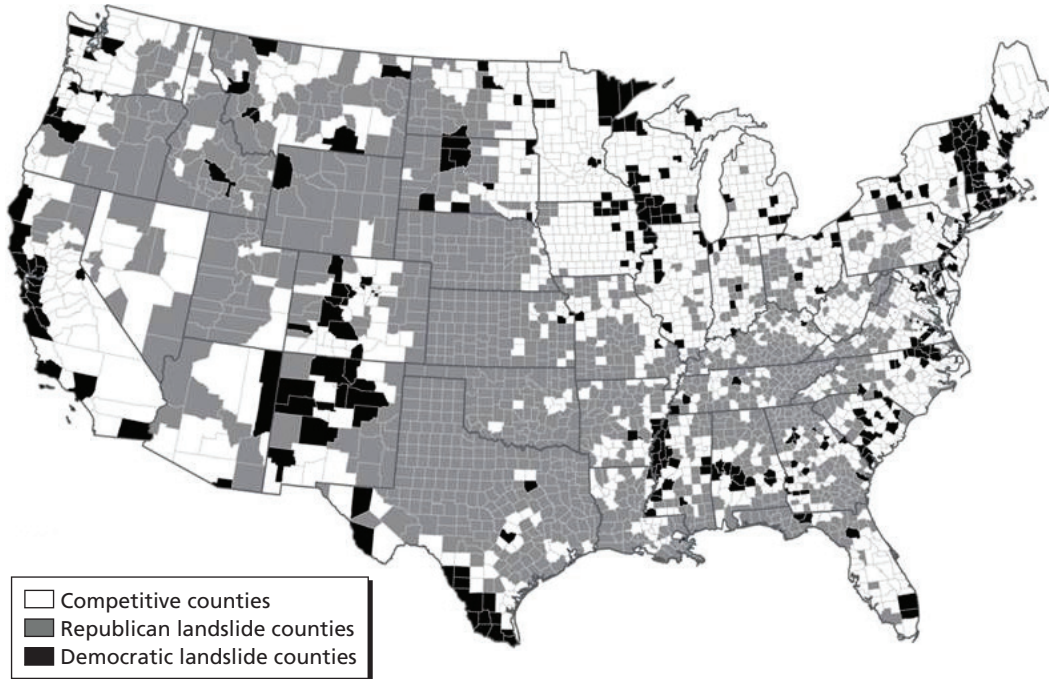
For those with a more technical bent, Figure 14 tracks the standard deviation of the Republican presidential vote across counties, going back to 1948.²⁷ The figure shows that the spread in the Republican (and, by definition, Democratic) percentages in counties across the nation has grown since 1976.

²⁵ Bishop, personal communication with author.

²⁶ Bishop, 2008, p. 10.

²⁷ Bishop, personal communication with author.

Figure 12
2008 U.S. Election, by County



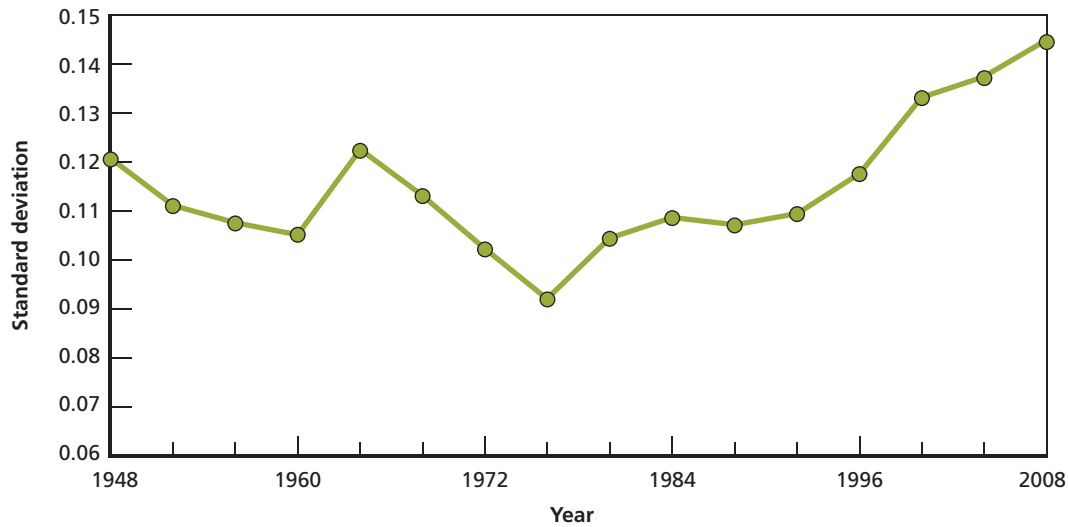
SOURCE: Bishop, personal communication. Used with permission.
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Figure 13
U.S. Election Victory Margins in Landslide Counties, 1948–2004

Year	Percentage of voters in landslide counties		
	Competitive elections	Uncompetitive elections	Victory margin
1948	35.8		4.7
1952		39.9	10.9
1956		46.6	15.5
1960	32.9		0.2
1964		63.5	22.7
1968	37.2		0.8
1972		59.0	23.6
1976	26.8		2.1
1980		41.8	10.6
1984		55.0	18.3
1988	41.7		7.8
1992	37.7		6.9
1996	42.1		9.5
2000	45.3		0.5
2004	48.3		2.5

SOURCE: Bishop, 2008. Used with permission.
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Figure 14
Standard Deviation of Republican Presidential Vote, 1948–2008



SOURCE: Bishop, personal communication.

NOTE: The figure shows the weighted standard deviation of the average Republican presidential vote across counties.

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This is also consistent with the observation that the number of competitive House districts has declined, and, therefore, the number of “safe” districts has grown. This is more evidence for the idea that individuals and families are sorting themselves into places where they are with people whose political views are similar to theirs. Figures 11 through 14 show this at the county level. Counties then aggregate into congressional districts and states.

Thus, to repeat the key point: The principal reason for the growth of congressional polarization over the past 35 years appears to be that—over time—the constituencies in congressional districts and in states have been changing their political outlooks to become more strongly conservative or liberal. Some House or Senate members, whose views mostly do not change much over time, get out of step with their constituents’ views. Eventually, they lose a reelection fight or are replaced upon retirement by someone whose views are more in step. Occasionally, they switch parties. The biggest victims of this process have been the moderates, who have largely disappeared on both sides of the aisle. Because of the electoral advantage of incumbents, the replacement process is slow, and the effects of the underlying causes take years to fully appear.

Other Possible Explanations

It is almost certainly true that the effect of geographic sorting is reinforced by the “echo chamber”—the notion that the media has allowed people to sort themselves into like-minded groups. People tune into radio or TV channels that tell them what they like to hear. They read newspapers, visit Web sites, and circulate emails that comport to their point of view. In effect, they go to places where their tribe’s creed is espoused and elaborated for the particular issue of the day.

Because of the growing effect of geographic sorting, the favorite villain of the polarization story—gerrymandering, or congressional redistricting by state legislatures—is not the villain. And, thus, the favorite solution—taking politics out of districting—is not the solution. The strongest evidence that gerrymandering is not the source of polarization is shown in Figure 8, which charts party polarization over time in the Senate: Gerrymandering plays no role in the Senate, and yet polarization is as large in the Senate as it is in the House. In effect, the people have gerrymandered themselves. This geographic sorting is apparent visually by comparing Figures 11 and 12.

McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal present additional evidence that underscores the importance of geographic sorting in the polarization story.²⁸ In a separate study, Thomas Mann also concluded that gerrymandering is not the root cause of polarization.²⁹

Other possible explanations of polarization also do not stand up to scrutiny.³⁰ For example, closed primaries appear to produce more liberal House Democrats than open primaries. But because there does not seem to be a similar effect on Republicans and because only about one-third of seats feature closed primaries, the overall effect on the polarization index is no more than 0.03.

An Era of Political Warfare

The Gingrich reforms of party discipline on the Republican side of Congress in the mid-1990s came too late to be a significant explanation for the polarization trend. But it is worth thinking about whether a form of the “right to instruct,” which Roger Sherman opposed in 1787, is now in play. Representatives and senators from ideologically homogeneous districts and states only “wander off” (to use Gephardt’s words) at their peril. If they do, they are frequently subjected to harsh attacks in the local media and to threats of a primary challenge. They are, in effect, being instructed.

If this were a formal RAND study of a policy challenge, it would conclude with an assessment of policy options, but I don’t have any. A process with roots as large and deep as political polarization is unlikely to be reversed easily, if at all. This means that our nation is in for an extended period of political warfare between the left and the right. Countries at war seek to dehumanize the enemy, to underscore their supposed moral defects, in order to motivate the troops. The analogy works as well in the political world. My own view is that this is bad and doesn’t auger well for solving the problems, foreign and domestic, that beset us. The Founding Fathers’ idea that problems would be solved by deliberation seems a distant prospect now.

²⁸ McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, “Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, No. 2, July 2009. In that study, the authors show that about half of the growth of polarization between the mid-1970s and the mid-2000s is due to sorting and about half is due to greater alignment between the voting records of members of Congress and the ideological propensity of their constituents. Through statistical thought experiments, they demonstrate that the sorting effects arise almost entirely from real-world constraints, such as state boundaries, the need for geographic contiguity, and requirements for minority representation; special boundary drawing (gerrymandering) is not needed to produce the sorting contribution to polarization. The analysis indicates that gerrymandering leads to incumbency protection but makes only a small contribution to the growth of polarization, if any.

²⁹ Mann, Thomas E., “Polarizing the House of Representatives: How Much Does Gerrymandering Matter?” in Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics*, Vol. 1, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006.

³⁰ Chapter Two in McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2008.

A more worrisome thought is that perhaps the Anti-Federalists are now being proved right and that we have a house divided against itself. I hope that the data that I've presented here have demonstrated that I'm not imagining this: Things have been changing in Washington.

Polarization and the Paradoxical Role of Independents

As a concluding thought, I have to wonder about the predicament of voters who are truly independent, that 12 percent or so of the electorate depicted in Figure 2.

Over the past couple of decades, independents have decided the outcome of presidential elections. In 2008, they went for Obama. In 2000 and 2004, they tilted toward Bush. Yet, they are shut out of the process of government. Given what I have shown you, they will not be elected to Congress, and their brethren in Congress—the erstwhile moderates—are gone. They are shut out of key administration posts, which have been filled almost entirely by party loyalists over the past three decades. If a leader, such as President Obama, wants to signal his openness to compromise, he will appoint someone from the other party to his administration, such as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates; a leader such as Obama wants to be seen as bipartisan, not nonpartisan. If a national commission is created to tackle a tough and politically controversial problem, it will be a bipartisan commission. Independents need not apply; they are simply not reliable. They are the “inconsistent” voters in the middle of Figure 3: You just can't be sure where they are going to come out on an ideological question.

But probably no independent party will rise and break up the polarization. Election laws make it very hard to mount a successful third-party campaign. Moreover, many independents simply don't agree with each other. Some are economic conservatives and social liberals, and some the reverse. Such people will disagree with each other more than they will with either the Republicans or the Democrats.

But you have to wonder whether one party will try to capture the bulk of the independent vote permanently by broadening its ideology. Such a party could thereby vanquish the other decisively and cause it, in the terms used in warfare, to accept the new political order and broaden its own ideology to return to power.

There is little sign of this actually happening, however.

Polarization and RAND Again

What difference does the polarization issue make to RAND? Our job is to let the facts speak to the policy debate. It is very hard to do that in the heated environment of the ongoing political war. Findings from RAND can seem to favor one side or the other, and not always the same side. Because of the credibility that RAND has built over the years, RAND research that contradicts political dogma can produce strong reactions. These might take several forms, but the constant will be a charge that the results of the research are “wrong.”

Over the years, we at RAND have learned many lessons about dealing with controversies, some the hard way. Figure 15 summarizes the most important ones. The first one—recognition that there could be a controversy—could be the hardest to put into practice. Analysts like me are too rational and sometimes too sure that the power of the analysis will overcome any charge that the work is wrong. I've learned that this idea is simply naïve. When groups are struggling

Figure 15
Dealing with Controversy

- Recognition that there could be controversy
- Quality assurance process: Importance of “bulletproofing”
- Careful “rollout” of the results
 - No surprises for potentially interested parties, including likely opponents; inform them in advance
 - Care in drafting press releases, especially avoiding hyperbole
 - Wide dissemination; easy availability of documentation
 - Background interviews for key journalists in advance
 - Newspaper opinion pieces prepared in advance
 - Research staff trained to deal with media
- After release: Availability for interviews, publication of opinion pieces if called for

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to win political battles, the niceties of the evidence presented in RAND studies will not stand in their way. Therefore, we at RAND need to have a system to ensure that potentially controversial results can be identified in advance. Then the release of the results can be prepared carefully.

Some of the key preparatory steps are identified in Figure 15. By far the most important is the quality assurance (QA) process, especially the concept of “bulletproofing.” To some of us who were trained to believe that the most important part of the QA process is the scientific peer review, this can sometimes be an alien concept. Of course, the scientific peer review is the *sine qua non*; the science must speak. But if controversy lurks, bulletproofing is essential. This involves thinking in advance about the political lines of attack against the results and then identifying individuals who might come from those political quarters. Such individuals should be brought into the review process.

The point here is not to avoid controversy, but to avoid unnecessary controversy. In addition to what such reviewers might contribute scientifically, they can also identify the ways that the presentation of the research might be misinterpreted or could unnecessarily inflame readers.

If we have done a good job of bulletproofing, then careful rollout of the study will help blunt the criticism. Some of the things we need to do are simply common courtesies, such as briefing the likely aggrieved parties in advance. This might help reduce or eliminate vitriol. Outside inputs also help prepare us to deal with the charges that the research is “wrong.”

Most importantly, however, good preparations help ensure that our message—the correct version of it—is heard and understood, and that efforts to distort or undermine our work are effectively countered. Doing all this is much more important for the RAND of today and tomorrow than it was for the RAND of the past.

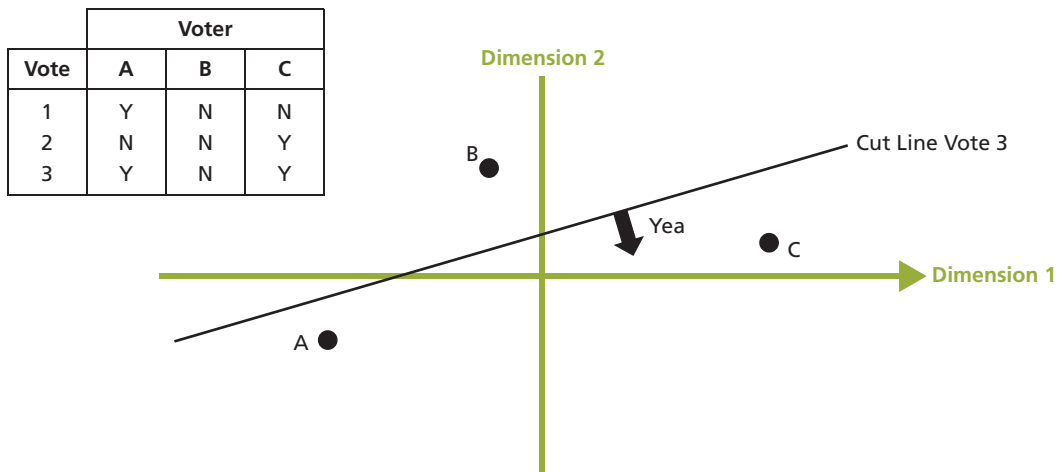
RAND, in today’s world, has a greater opportunity to do good than it had in the past. RAND’s name is associated with objectivity and nonpartisanship. Our work is trusted. In today’s partisan world, this is a precious asset that few other organizations possess. As a result, our ability to achieve our mission of improving policy has grown. We simply must guard against letting polarization and partisanship stop us.

The DW-NOMINATE Method

Based on all roll call votes in a given two-year Congress, the DW-NOMINATE method is used to position each member of Congress at their “ideal points” in an n -dimensional space. The dimensions might represent political philosophies in different political domains, such as economics, defense, social questions, civil liberties, and so forth. This is perhaps more easily understood by examining Figure A1, which is based on a hypothetical three-member chamber. On votes 1 and 2, it appears that voters A, B, and C are aligned on a single left-to-right dimension, where which is left and right is purely a matter of convention. Based on these two votes and the single dimension (called dimension 1 here), one could hypothesize that a “cut point” on the left-right dimension for vote 1 fell between voters A and B and that the cut point moved right on vote 2 to divide B and C. Historically, dimension 1 has dealt with the government’s role in the economy (more versus less, left versus right).

Vote 3 is initially a puzzle. It clearly does not fit the single-dimension model, because no cut point on the left-right dimension can explain the vote pattern. There are two possibilities: First, B’s vote was simply a mistake or driven by some issue that we can’t possibly understand. This would be what statisticians refer to as “noise” or the error term. The second possibility is that another political dimension is in play in vote 3. This could be an urban-versus-rural issue, for example. It might be that only that new dimension is at play and that a cut point can be imagined on the y -axis between B’s and C’s projection onto the y -axis. Or, perhaps, both

Figure A.1
DW-NOMINATE Model of a Hypothetical Three-Person Chamber



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dimensions are at play, so that we need a sloped cut line, as illustrated in Figure A.1. With only three votes and three voters, there is not enough information to determine the location of the cut line very precisely. But with a two-year record of roll call votes and 434 representatives (the Speaker usually does not vote) and 100 senators, it is possible to locate the ideal points for each with some precision and to determine the best cut line for each vote. This process is explained in detail in Poole and Rosenthal's books.

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