Congressional Polarization, Perfect Storms, and Evolving Presidential-House Election Results

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The political parties in Congress are deeply polarized, with Democrats and Republicans in both houses increasingly voting in united blocs against the other. Political division also extends to the electorate. Partisanship is also increasing among voters. The percentage of voters choosing to identify with a party has gradually increased. More of those who identify with a party are voting for the candidates of their party. Those who identify as Democrat or Republican are steadily diverging in their approval of presidential job performance.

What is driving this division and how did we arrive at this situation? There is plentiful research about the former question, but perhaps less clarity about the latter. With regard to the former the evidence indicates the public has increasingly become divided over matters involving over race, ideology, class, cultural norms, religious attachment, and authoritarianism.

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Survey evidence indicates that variations on each of these traits are a source of strong partisan divisions. Blacks, Hispanics and whites differ significantly in which party they support, as do self-identified conservatives and liberals. The less and more affluent differ. Those with strong attachments to religion and seculars differ. Those classified as authoritarian disagree with the nurturing. There may be arguments about which of these is most important, but divisions within the public are steadily growing and creating electoral bases for the parties that wish different public policies.

How these strong partisan divisions emerged as congressional polarization is not as clear. The dominant theme of the academic literature of the 1990s and even early 2000s was that elections had become candidate-centered. House members were seen as cultivating personal, almost apolitical bases of support. Members had access to vast resources to promote themselves and reduce the impact of national electoral swings. Some scholars so far as to ask whether there has really been any increase in conflict and whether parties were even relevant. This was a continuation and extension of the “decline-of-party” theme that dominated in the 1980s and 1990s.

Just as this view appeared to be accepted as accurate, it became difficult to ignore the steady increase in partisan divisions in Congress. Members were voting together as parties.

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The concern here is how did party polarization emerge from what appeared to be a candidate-centered political world. We need to explain how party divisions became so clear and intense.

**Explaining Changing Party Positioning**

The 1960s - 1980s are often cited as an era in which bipartisanship in Congress worked. Each party contained ideological and geographical diversity, which constrained the degree of conflict. To some that appears to be an era we can look back upon as reflecting more reasonable parties. Each party, however, contained wings frustrated by the degree of moderation that prevailed. The resulting frustrations and pursuits of more coherent electoral bases prompted realignment and shifting party policy positions. For decades the Democratic Party had a base in the South. In the 1960s Lyndon Johnson sought to reduce that reliance and supported programs that would attract Blacks and northern voters. At the same time Republicans were pursuing votes and seats in the more conservative South.

This process of realignment resulted in first one party and then the other becoming dominated by their most ideological and fervent wings. Interpreting this repositioning within each party is often seen as a party struggling to balance the wishes of its new constituency with the need to appeal to the middle. In the 1970s and 1980s Democrats were seen by many as too...

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identified with minorities and other liberal causes,19 and the party struggled to move toward a more moderate set of stances.20 Bill Clinton is generally seen as the candidate who moved the party toward the middle. Now Republicans are seen as the party that pursued new constituencies and is struggling with how much to allow itself to be defined by those pursued. Republicans engaged in first a lengthy pursuit of Southern conservatives, and then Christian fundamentalists, and most recently Tea Party voters. At each step there has been extensive political commentary that the party has swung hard to the right and is risking alienating many moderates. The charge is that the party is becoming extreme.21

The current opposition of Republicans to Obamacare and their demand for budget cuts is a particularly interesting matter because of how it is explained as a party in the grip of extremism. The presumption is that the party has been captured by Tea Party candidates and activists.22 The party needed seats and was able to capitalize on Tea Party anger in 2010 to win seats, but now finds itself controlled by House Members who are too conservative. It is not uncommon to read arguments that these “radicals” are not reflective of significant public sentiment, but is derived from gerrymandering, a press that does not present facts but has been bullied into “he said – she said,” and the machinations of wealthy industrialists who fund conservative causes.23 It is not unusual to read stories in which Republicans with unusual views about creationism, Obama’s legitimacy, environmental matters, etc, are quoted such that the

22 Columnists expressing this interpretation
story line is that some Republican Members are “crazy,” anti-intellectual,\textsuperscript{24} and not quite connected to reality. The underlying presumption is that Republican policy demands are not based on facts but ideological commitments.\textsuperscript{25} Negotiating with them is difficult because they are motivated by ideology and not facts. The larger narrative is that each party, in pursuit of a new majority, has catered too much to its newest and more extreme electoral base and must struggle to bring itself back toward the middle.

**Party Realignment and Perfect Storms**

Although these interpretations of each party’s troubles have some validity, the notion that a party – the current Republican Party - is in the grip of “crazies” dismisses the substantive arguments presented by the party. The argument to be presented here is that the development of congressional polarization is a logical result of the trends of the last several decades. The positions of Democrats and Republicans are also a logical consequence of these trends.

There are four trends that have culminated in the current situation. These trends have a lengthy history. The adoption of the candidate-centered view of congressional elections was essentially mistaken. The transition in electoral bases of the parties and the lengthy but temporary disconnection of presidential and House election bases was misinterpreted as a decline in party. That connection has been restored as the lengthy realignment has come to an end, at least for now. The four trends are as follows

- Prior to the 1960s the nation had the odd situation of having the most liberal region of the nation represented by Republicans and the most conservative represented by Democrats. Over the last fifty years the parties have largely switched the geographical location of their strongest electoral bases. The result is a Democratic


Party with a more consistent liberal base and a Republican Party with a more consistent conservative base.

- The process of changing party electoral bases was lengthy, with presidential results changing faster than House results. The result was a significant rise in split-outcomes, which was interpreted as a rise in candidate-centered elections. As this transition continued it has resulted in almost all congressional Democrats and Republicans having electoral bases that are consistently partisan and supportive. There is less pressure to be moderate.

- In recent decades the partisan presumptions about how society works and the proper role of government have steadily diverged. Democrats increasingly see individuals as unfairly affected by social conditions. They presume government should respond to unmet needs. Republicans continue to believe in personal responsibility and see government provision of benefits as creating dependency which saps individual initiative. The conflict is fundamental.

- As these ideological battles have developed, the cost of social programs, and particularly health care, have steadily grown. The Affordable Care Act is heavily redistributive. Over time the more affluent (achievers in the eyes of Republicans) have come to pay a growing percentage of the federal income tax. The top 10 percent now provide 71% of income tax revenue. Deficits are also large and sustained. Democrats see these trends as investing in the health of the overall society and as fair. Republicans see them as reflecting a government that provides too much and takes too much from those who succeed.

The result in a sense is a perfect storm of political conditions. Democrats believe government should do more and represent constituencies that are more supportive of this effort. They see redistribution as fair. Republicans believe personal responsibility should be encouraged and represent constituencies that are more supportive of this position. They see deficits as too large and sustained and the current tax burdens as unfair.

**Regional Differences and Switching Electoral Bases**

The Northeast is more liberal than the South. Despite this enduring difference, for much of the 1900s Republicans dominated the Northeast and Democrats dominated the South.

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26 Reiter and Stonecash, *Counter Realignment*, 81-118.
Each party had a base that was not as compatible with its principles as might have prevailed. Presidential candidates sought to change this and in the 1960s they pursued electoral support in the regions historically dominated by the other party. This increased Democratic success in the Northeast and Republican success in the South (Figure 1). After some fluctuation, the 1984 election began a sustained advantage for Democrats in the Northeast and for Republicans in the South. In House elections the historical oddity in party success by region prevailed until late in the century and moderated the stances of the parties to some degree. This persisted until the mid-1990s, when a distinct reversal was finally evident (Figure 2). That is, it was only within the last 30 years for presidential candidates and in the last 15 years for congressional candidates that each party acquired and sustained a base more clearly supportive of conservative and liberal policy positions. This shift in electoral bases for presidential and House candidates was lengthy and complicated27 but by the mid-1990s the stage was set for each party to establish policy positions that were consistently ideological.

Differential Rates of Change and Ambiguity

Realignment was changing the historical electoral bases of the two parties. The rates of change differed, however, for presidential and congressional elections, creating interpretation ambiguities. Figure 3 presents the correlation of Republican state presidential and House results
for 1904 and successive years with 1900. For 60 years Republican results were stable. Then in 1964 and after presidential candidates pursued and obtained a very different pattern of success. Their relative success after the 1960s was essentially the reverse of what had prevailed. By 1972 their results had a correlation of -.66 with 1900 results. This reversal persisted, with some fluctuation, thereafter.

**Figure 3: Correlation of Republican Presidential and House State Percentages from 1904 - 2008 with 1900 State Percentages**

House results changed at a much slower rate and it was not until the 1990s that the two sets of results once again overlapped. The lag in House results created a decline in the association of presidential and House results and a rise in split-outcomes. Figure 4 indicates the correlation between presidential and House results within each year from 1900 through 2012. It also reports the percentage of House districts that experienced split-outcomes. As realignment proceeded and House results lagged with many incumbents able to hang on to their seats even as presidential results were shifting away from them, the correlation plummeted in the 1960s and 1970s. With House results lagging, the percentage of split-outcomes reached the mid-40s in the
1970s and 1980s. As House incumbents retired and were replaced by the opposing party in regions experiencing partisan change the percentage of split-outcomes steadily declined and reached seven percent in 2012.

**Figure 4: Correlation of Republican Presidential-House Election Results and Percent Split-Outcomes, 1900-2012**

It was this lag in House results that prompted many to see this as the emergence of candidate-centered politics. The argument was that House Members were able to separate their election results from national swings and underlying district partisan sentiments and create personal vote bases that were higher.\(^{28}\) This interpretation neglected the role of parties in pursuing different electoral bases and actively recruiting candidates that would be compatible

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with changing party goals. It also probably led to a lag in the recognition of the developing polarization.29

The important matter is that by the late-1990s the electoral bases of presidential, House and Senate candidates overlapped to a significant degree.30 This contributed to party polarization. Members who are elected in districts that also support the party’s presidential candidate have greater confidence that their results reflect consistent support for their party’s positions. Those who come from split districts have no such confidence and must moderate their voting records in recognition of the precariousness of their electoral situation. As split-outcomes declined, there were more members who had confidence their electoral situation and policy positions were supported within their district.

**Diverging Interpretations of How Society Does and Should Work, Program Growth and Taxes: An Invitation to Polarization**

While the parties were acquiring more coherent electoral bases, the way that liberals and conservatives see American society was steadily diverging. America has long been a nation with


a strong commitment to individualism.\textsuperscript{31} The central belief is that America is a place of widespread opportunity to achieve if an individual takes the initiative. If an individual does achieve they can enjoy the fruits of their labor. If they do not succeed they are responsible for their situation. Government should not intrude to help people who do not fare well because it will discourage initiative and personal responsibility.

Over time liberalism has come to challenge that framework for interpreting variations in success or failure.\textsuperscript{32} The social science community has played a major role in creating an alternative interpretation that many people lack opportunity and are significantly affected by their class and social context. There are also groups - minorities, women, gays – who are not treated well by society, making their achievement more difficult. The result is that liberals are uneasy about the central implication of individualism – that individuals are responsible for their situation.\textsuperscript{33} Individuals may not have had opportunity, experienced discrimination, and may have suffered setbacks such as diseases that they did not cause. The rich also may not be entirely deserving of their wealth, and should expect to pay taxes. As Elizabeth Warren expressed it during the 2012 campaign for a U.S. Senate in Massachusetts:

There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. You built a factory out there? Good for you. But I want to be clear: you moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for; you hired workers the rest of us paid to educate; you were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. Now look, you built a factory and it turned into something terrific, or a great idea? God bless you. Keep a chunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{33} Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, \textit{The Battle Over Personal Responsibility in American Politics}, manuscript.

\textsuperscript{34} \url{www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20110042-503544.html}.
Conservatives have not accepted this shifting interpretation of American society. They still see individualism as central to how America should operate. They see the emergence of welfare and other social programs as destructive of what made America successful. Their central concern is that government is coming to support too many people, creating dependency rather than hard working individuals. The reason many people are failing is because they are losing the inclination to adopt the behaviors that help people achieve.

The result is a fundamental difference in views of how much government should help people. Liberals and conservatives see the world very differently. It has become an ongoing ideological battle and creates intense conflicts over the legitimacy and funding of social programs.

The battle involves not just whether programs should exist but how they will be paid for. It is widely reported that the distribution of income and wealth have become more unequal, which prompts liberals to see it as proper to raise more money from the affluent. Conservatives acknowledge those trends but are very concerned about the growing reliance on the more successful, achievers, for income tax revenues. The following charts present first the percentage of income tax revenues that come from various percentiles of tax filers and then the

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41 For historical evidence of growing income inequality, see charts presented by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: http://www.offthechartsblog.org/exploring-income-inequality-part-1-overview/.
progressivity of the federal income tax system.\textsuperscript{43} Conservatives argue that too much of federal social programs is funded by the more affluent. The tax system has also become significantly redistributive, particularly as the EITC program has expanded. The issue of tax increases has become a fundamental divide and no Republican has voted for a tax increase since 1993.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{tax_burden.png}
\caption{The Income Tax Burden Has Grown More Progressive Over Time}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{43} This focus on just federal income taxes is challenged as appropriate by liberals because it neglects state and local income, sales, and property taxes and various fees. The inclusion of those taxes results in a less overall progressive tax burden within the nation.\textsuperscript{44}

The Health Care Battle

These trends have prompted the bulk of the Republican Party to argue that it is time to force a slowdown in the growth of the welfare state. They have fought the extension of unemployment benefits and are seeking significant cuts in Food Stamps. The Affordable Health Care Act has become the prime example of the differences between the two parties. To Democrats the case for the national government expanding access to health care is clear. The
percentage of employers providing health care is declining. Younger people and those with lower incomes are much less likely to have insurance.⁴⁵ As expressed by Paul Krugman, there was a clear moral imperative to enact this legislation: “One side (Democrats) saw health reform, with its subsidized extension of coverage to the uninsured, as fulfilling a moral imperative: wealthy nations, it believed, have an obligation to provide all their citizens with essential care.”⁴⁶ Any essay by a liberal / Democrat about health care carries with it the often-unstated presumption that some people are without insurance and that simply must be corrected. There were also practical considerations for addressing the health insurance issue – many with no insurance showing up at emergency rooms with hospitals essentially forced to serve them and many have inadequate insurance. The result was a bill that requires insurance, provides subsidies, and specifies minimum benefits.

Among Republicans, the opposition to government provision of health care has built over the years. Figure 5 indicates how strong Democratic and Republican identifiers responded over the years when asked about who should be responsible for securing health care: government or individuals. The most committed Republicans have become strongly supportive of individual responsibility. Strong Democrats have never been very supportive of this. As strong Republicans became more supportive of individual responsibility, the difference between Democrats and Republicans have steadily grown and in 2012 reached 66 points.

As the legislative struggle over the Affordable Care Act was unfolding the division between the two parties was profound. A Gallup poll conducted in September, 2009 captures the difference.47 When asked if government or individuals should be responsible for securing insurance for individuals, Democrats were 62 % government – 35 % individuals. Among Republicans the responses were 10 % government – 89 % individuals.

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The divide over this legislation involves not just the philosophical issue of who should provide health insurance. The legislation mandates that everyone secure insurance. Democrats see this as the only way to create a wide net of contributors, while Republicans see this as a government effort to dictate individual behavior and restrict freedom. The legislation also specifies minimum benefits that must accompany any program. Democrats see this as protecting consumers from inadequate private insurance plans, while Republicans see this as imposing a “one-size-fits-all” package on many individuals who do not need all the benefits and as restricting individual freedom. Finally, the bill involves significant redistribution in that government subsidizes the premiums for lower income individuals. Some have called it one of the largest redistributive program enacted in the nation’s history. It is not surprising that this legislation has become a continuing source of conflict between the two parties.

Summary: the Combination

The current congressional polarization reflects a set of conditions that have taken a while to evolve. Beginning in the 1960s Republicans sought a more conservative electoral base and Democrats sought a more liberal electoral base. Those pursuits were initiated largely by presidential candidates and it took some time for each party’s candidates to achieve their objective. Republicans came to dominate the South and Democrats the Northeast. As the transition occurred House results lagged, creating a high percentage of split-outcomes and the mistaken impression that congressional elections were becoming candidate-centered. Eventually House and Senate election results caught up with presidential results, creating unified and consistent party bases. By the mid to late 1990s each party had a coherent electoral base more compatible with its policy positions.

As this clarity was developing, social programs continued to grow and the reliance on the more affluent for federal income tax revenue also increased. Then in the late 2000s federal budget deficits increased dramatically. Democrats saw the deficits as unavoidable to maintain programs, while Republicans saw them as dangerous for the future of the nation and proposed plans to cut programs and lower deficits. The Affordable Care Act, enacted in 2010, embodies fundamental these fundamental conflicts over programs, taxes, and the role of the federal government.

The combination of differing and coherent electoral bases, evolving social programs, and the distribution of tax burdens is unlikely to go away soon. Polarization is a logical consequence of current conditions and is also unlikely to diminish soon.