

Partisan Polarization in Congress and the Historic Shift in the Geographical Bases of U.S. Political Parties

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I. Theory and Method

From the 1960s through the early 21st century the American party system underwent two major transformations that were tightly interlinked. At the macro level there were two crucial historical trends that interacted and reinforced each other—the ideological polarization of the parties and the regional shift of the party system.¹⁾ Both these trends were apparent as they happened, but the long-term causal connection between these two phenomena is slowly disappearing from contemporary political memory and thus needs historical documentation. The demise of the conservative southern Democrats and the contribution of new southern Republicans to a conservative Republican revival are well known to contemporary American politicians, pundits, and political scientists. However, the corresponding atrophy of the Republican Party in the North and the urbanized states of the West and Midwest is less salient, or at least was until Barack Obama recently expanded the Democratic reach in the Electoral College.

More importantly, the polarization of the parties that is so criticized today actually began in the 1960s, driven by emergent social and political movements such as the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the women's movement, etc. and conservative reactions to these social dislocations. The movement of the Democratic Party to the left and the Republican Party to the right caused a slow but immense shift in the regional bases of the parties that turned the once solidly Democratic South into a Republican stronghold and the once predominantly Republican North into a Democratic stronghold. As the regional shift proceeded, it caused further the ideological polarization of the parties, leading to the bitter partisan wrangling of the 1990s and early 21st century.

1) Speel, Robert, *Changing Patterns of Voting in the Northern United States: Electoral Realignment 1952–1996*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania UP, 1998.

Contemporary explanation of partisan polarization within American political science tends to focus on variables that are prominent in the 1990s such as the emergence of the new Republican congressional majorities in 1994, the rising prevalence of primary competition in congressional races, the new pattern of gerrymandering in state legislatures to maximize safe seats, and the decline of bipartisan network news in favor of sensationalist and partisan niche news programming.²⁾ The merits of these theories are not directly discussed here. Rather, a more macrohistorical approach is used to supplement these analyses with a method that demonstrates that longer-term political, societal, and cultural trends have shaped the current polarization of the parties. An innovative method of analyzing Electoral College and congressional election results is presented which summarizes large amounts of geographical data over time in manner that can be easily interpreted, much like summary statistics, and empirically demonstrates long-term shifts in regional patterns of voting. Only macrohistorical political analysis can show the complex long-term connection between ideological polarization and the regional shift.

2) Eilperin, Juliet, *Fight Club Politics: How Partisanship is Poisoning the House of Representatives*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007, Mann, Thomas and Bruce Cain, ed., *Party Lines: Competition, Partisanship, and Congressional Redistricting*, Washington, DC.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005, Mann, Thomas and Norman Ornstein, *The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing American and How to Get It Back on Track*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, Sinclair, Barbara, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress*, Washington, DC.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2007.

II. The Polarization of the American Party System, 1960–early 1980s

In the 1950s, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans were ideologically coherent parties.³⁾ There were relatively liberal northeastern Republicans such as President Eisenhower or New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and there were very conservative southern Democrats such as Senators James Eastland of Mississippi or Richard Russell of Georgia who at the time were the main roadblocks to civil rights and other progressive legislation. The most conservative region of the country, the South, was solidly Democratic, having virtually no Republican elected officials from the region, and the most liberal area of the nation, the Northeast, was predominantly Republican.

However, by the mid-1990s there were virtually no liberals left in the Republican party and very few conservatives left in the Democratic party.⁴⁾ The parties have become relatively ideologically consistent, polarized on a left–right continuum, although each have some moderates in the middle. The Republicans especially have become almost like a European parliamentary party, often voting on unanimous or nearly unanimous party lines on key issues in recent years, but the Democrats have closed ranks as well. The Republicans have held a substantial majority of seats in the formerly monolithically Democratic South for a decade, while the Democrats have been the dominant party in the formerly Republican Northeast for a generation.

This paper explains how this regional shift unfolded and presents

3) Burns, James MacGregor, *The Deadlock of Democracy*, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

4) Rae, Nicole C., *The Decline and Fall of Liberal Republicans from 1952 to the Present*, New York: Oxford UP, 1989.

empirical evidence to show the two-way causal link between ideological polarization and the regional shift.

The polarization of the parties began in the 1960s and early 1970s and at first was largely due to political and social forces external to the party system. The most significant were the civil rights movement and protest against the Vietnam War, but also important were other social forces energized by these massive political upheavals, including the revived women's movement, the emergence of the environmental movement, and a whole series of social and cultural clashes often subsumed under the label of the generation gap.⁵⁾ The civil rights movement won African-Americans the right to vote in the South, where approximately half still live, and where virtually none had voted before. This set off a chain of events which completely transformed southern politics and eventually the national party system. Newly enfranchised southern African-Americans and their northern cousins, who also had gained rights to equal employment, non-discrimination in services, and began voting overwhelming Democratic. However, conservative southern whites began voting against Democratic presidential candidates and later began slowly migrating into the Republican party in a process that will be described later in this paper.

Democratic President Lyndon Johnson had Americanized the Vietnam War and his Vice President Hubert Humphrey, candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968, supported it. The first large scale support for anti-war campaigns was seen in the Democratic primaries in 1968, as millions voted for anti-war candidates Bobby Kennedy and Gene McCarthy. The assassination of the leading anti-war candidate Kennedy led to the Democrats nominating pro-war Humphrey. The winner in 1968 was Republican Nixon who promised he had a secret plan to end the war. In the early 1970s the Democratic primaries for all

5) See for example White, Theodore, *The Making of the President, 1960, 1964, and 1968* New York: Atheneum, 1962, 1965, 1969.

national offices became a vehicle for citizens opposed to the war to express their views in the electoral process.⁶⁾

A new generation of women activists had been mobilized by the civil rights movement and the campaigns against the Vietnam War. As the momentum of the civil rights campaigns dissipated and the war in Vietnam wound down, many veteran activist women and their younger counterparts energized by these examples began to focus on issues of gender inequality. Other activists turned their attention to the degradation of the environment by industrial society. The “culture wars” now so vigorously prosecuted by Christian conservatives actually began in the 1960s not only with the organized women’s rights groups, but also with the “sexual revolution,” the appearance of rock and rollers as cultural icons, and the hippies as a popular culture vision of an alternative life style.

These political and social changes have often been lumped together as the generation gap. The older generation, what has been labeled the “greatest generation,” had been forged in the sacrifices and deprivations of the Great Depression and World War II.⁷⁾ Most of them believed the existing system was the greatest the world had ever seen and generally saw mass protest as tearing down a great country. Most of the “baby boomers” knew only the affluence of fifties and sixties and saw no reason for denying either their feelings or their political views. They became acutely aware of the injustices of race, gender, and the Vietnam War, and the dangers of unrestrained exploitation of the natural world as these issues were publicized by protest movements. Ever greater differences in opinion between the older and younger generations began appearing in survey data.

Furthermore, the technology of reporting the news was having a huge

6) See for example White, Theodore, *The Making of the President, 1972*, New York: Scribner, 1973.

7) Brokaw, Tom, *The Greatest Generation*, New York: Random House, 2004.

impact on the political process. The increasing importance of TV was changing both what was perceived as important “news” and how the political process worked. A party’s image projected by TV became increasingly important as a majority of households got a TV and most people begin to get most of their news from the TV. John Kennedy won the 1960 election in large part because he won the first TV debates between the candidates. However, a majority of voters who only heard the debates on radio thought Nixon had won, demonstrating the importance of TV images. The spectacles of bitter party battles at their national conventions, seen across the land on TV, contributed to landslide defeats of the Republicans in 1964 and the Democrats in 1968 and 1972. Eventually, both parties learned their lessons and the national party conventions, which had been the place where presidential nominees had actual been chosen in multi-vote marathons, became the week long TV commercials for the parties Americans now endure.

One key direct effect of the growing importance of TV in politics and political campaigns was to increase the influence of interest groups and ideologues. As paying for ads on TV became roughly half of the typical campaign budget, interest groups and ideological groups that could raise the big money needed became increasingly more crucial to political campaigns.

This wave of social changes had one crucial impact on the political process—the rise of primaries and open caucuses as methods of selecting party nominees for office, from president on down to local officials. Historically, delegates to the national conventions that selected the national presidential candidates were chosen in small, closed meetings of party leaders called caucuses. However, in part as a response to the need to get candidates who can campaign effectively on TV, in part to appear more democratic in the media age, and in part to respond to demands by

insurgent activists to open up the party, by the 1960s the number of states that chose their party candidates by primaries was growing rapidly. In 1972 the Democratic party demanded that all delegates to the 1976 convention be chosen either by primary or open caucus where not just party leaders but any ordinary Democrat could participate. Those rules have been modified somewhat, but since the 1970s the overwhelming majority of delegates to both party's conventions have been chosen either by primaries or some kind of open caucus system. Most congressional and state officials are also so chosen. The party machines which had dominated the candidate selection process have largely disappeared.

The titanic political struggles of the times and the changes in the nomination system led to the appearance of polarizing presidential candidates. It now became possible for party activists and those with strong ideological convictions to vote against the preferences of high party leaders and nominate their chosen candidate. TV favors the good-looking, but since the average voter does not vote in primaries or go to caucuses, the system also favors the party faithful who turn out, who overall are more ideological than those who don't turn out.

1964 Republican candidate Barry Goldwater was the first ideologically polarizing major party candidate since the Great Depression. Goldwater had written a book "The Conscience of a Conservative" in a time when liberals dominated the public opinion polls and elite attitudes.⁸⁾ In 1964 the Civil Rights Act had passed, the biggest advance in African-American rights since the Civil War. However, Goldwater had opposed it. He also called for the Americanization of the Vietnam War. Democrat Johnson ran as the peace candidate, although as soon as he was reelected he did in fact send 500,000 U.S. troops to Vietnam. Goldwater carried only five southern states and his home state of Arizona.

8) Goldwater, Barry, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, New York: Hillman Books, 1960.

In 1968 one polarizing candidate was George Wallace, a southern Democrat running as an independent. Wallace was governor of Alabama and a staunch opponent of civil rights. When national troops had been called in to force the integration of the University of Alabama, Wallace had personally stood between the troops and the door of the school. Wallace also called for massive bombing in Vietnam without regard to civilian casualties. Bobby Kennedy, brother of the slain President John Kennedy, was another polarizing candidate in 1968. He ran against sitting Vice President Hubert Humphrey for the Democratic nomination. Kennedy appealed to the antiwar sentiment, promising a quick end to the Vietnam War and a return to reform in domestic policy. Kennedy was assassinated before the convention. Wallace was the last independent candidate to win electoral votes. He won the 5 southern states that Goldwater won plus one more, Arkansas.

The polarizing candidate of 1972 was George McGovern. In 1968 the pro-war faction of the Democratic party nominated their man Hubert Humphrey after Bobby Kennedy was killed. In 1972 the peace faction won out. McGovern promised not only an immediate withdrawal from Vietnam but an entirely new U.S. foreign policy not based on Cold War principles, and a major expansion of domestic social programs. McGovern carried only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia against the incumbent Richard Nixon, who also promised that “peace is a hand” in Vietnam.

In 1980 conservative Republican Ronald Reagan was also in many ways a polarizing candidate, but with a huge difference—he won.

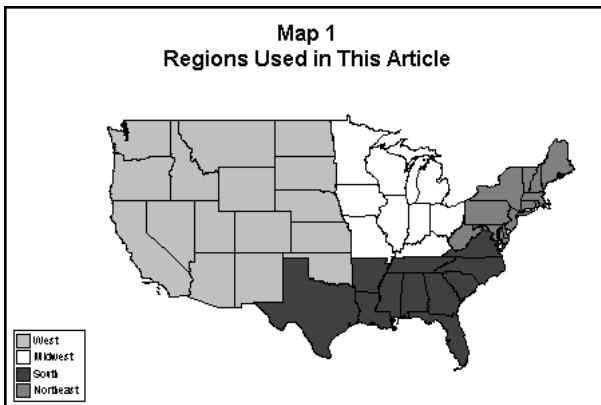
III. The Regional Shift

The polarization of the parties along ideological lines set off a huge,

long-term shift in the regional bases of both parties. American politics has long been based on region, the U.S. even fought a civil war over it.

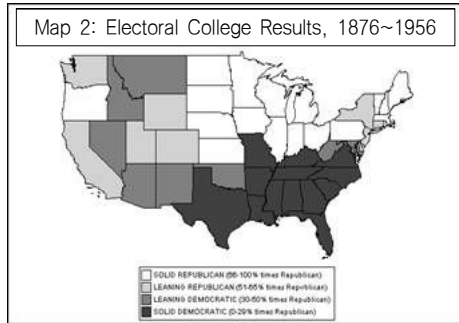
Long-term regional political trends are highlighted here in a simple yet powerful cumulative mapping technique that is an innovative new way of summarizing Electoral College and congressional election data over time. To my knowledge, this method is as yet unique in political science research.

Map 1 shows the breakdown of regions used in this paper, which differs only slightly from the conventional typology of American regions by placing the 4 plains states, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas in the West rather than the Midwest because since 1960 they have voted more like the West. The West is roughly half the geographic U.S., but because it is less densely populated, it has the lowest population of any region.

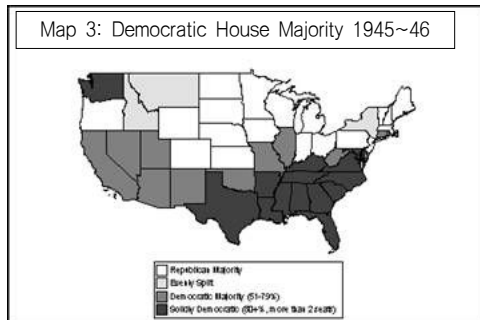


A brief look at Electoral College voting from 1876–1956 in Map 2 shows the distinct regional pattern of what I simply call the Old System. The darker the state, the more times it voted Democratic in the Electoral College; the lighter the state, the more times it voted Republican. The

South is overwhelmingly Democratic, the Midwest is overwhelmingly Republican, the Northeast leans heavily Republican, and the West is competitive.



This system was still in effect in the 1940s. Map 3 of state delegations to the U.S. House of Representatives in the Congress of 1945–1946 tracks quite well the overall pattern. Dark states, found almost entirely in the South, have 80%+ Democratic delegations to Congress. Darker gray states have 51–79% Democrats. Light gray states are evenly split. White states are represented by more Republicans than Democrats.



Map 3: Democratic House Majority 1945~46



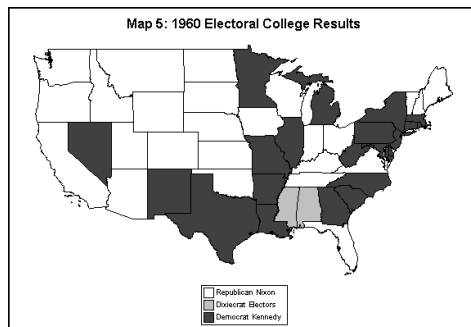
The 1948 Truman–Dewey presidential race (Map 4), the last close race under this system, is also similar, although Truman, being from the Midwestern state of Missouri, won the race by gaining more support in the Midwest than Democrats usually did. Because Truman desegregated the armed forces and in a few other ways supported civil rights for African–Americans, he lost some southern states to a southern Democratic third party candidate.

However, simply looking at Democratic or Republican strength during this period is not enough to understand the ideological dynamics of the time. During most of this period the U.S. political system can better be described as a three party system. Conservative Southern and liberal Northern Democrats joined in an alliance of convenience against the Republicans who were dominant from the Civil War to the Great Depression (1861–1930), but they had very different ideological views. The conservative coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats usually controlled Congress during this period, even after the Republicans lost party control of Congress in the 1930s. From the 1950s Congressional Quarterly, the authority on congressional voting, traced what it called the “conservative coalition index,” that is, the number of times a majority of congressional Republicans voted with a majority of Southern Democrats

against a majority of Northern Democrats.⁹⁾ These kinds of votes appeared scores of times each year on key bills and the conservative coalition had a high percentage of victories almost every year. The Republican party also had its relatively liberal northeastern wing, which while never particularly strong in Congress, controlled the presidential nomination process in the Republican Party from 1940–1956.¹⁰⁾

IV. The Effect of the Regional Shift on Presidential Elections

The regional shift began in the election of 1960 (Map 5) when the Democrats nominated Massachusetts Senator John Kennedy and the Republicans nominated California Senator Richard Nixon. Kennedy was a Catholic from the East coast and Nixon was a Protestant from the West coast.



9) Congressional Quarterly, *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, Washington, D.C., Congressional Quarterly Press, annual series.

10) Burns, James MacGregor, *The Deadlock of Democracy*. Nicole C., 1989, *The Decline and Fall of Liberal Republicans from 1952 to the Present*, New York, Oxford UP.

Kennedy won unusual support for a Democrat in the Northeast and Midwest based not only on region but because that was where most of the nation's Catholics lived (and Jews, to whom Kennedy's Catholicism was irrelevant). Nixon won solid support in the West, again, not only because of region, but because of its overwhelmingly Protestant population, some of whom were uncomfortable with the idea of a Catholic president.

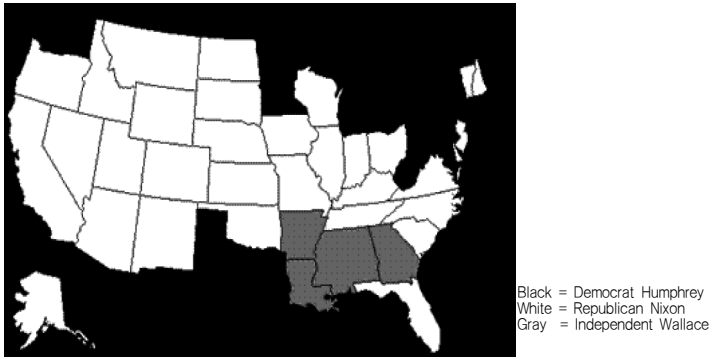
The regional shift in presidential voting went into high gear beginning in the 1964 election. In 1964 Democratic President Lyndon Johnson had led the fight for historic civil rights legislation that began the transformation of life in the American South. He was widely praised for this in most of the country, but at the time generally despised by whites in the South. Johnson won a landslide victory with over 60% of the national vote, but he lost five southern states to Republican candidate Barry Goldwater who opposed the civil rights bill. The 5 southern states Goldwater carried had not voted Republican in the 20th century.

The election of 1968 (Map 6) was a critical election that set in place a pattern in presidential voting that has survived up to today.¹¹⁾ (Key, Burnham, Speel) For the first time in the 20th century the Democrats did not win a majority of the states in the South, carrying only Texas. Republican Nixon carried five southern states and breakaway racist southern Democrat George Wallace carried the other five (the last third party candidate to win Electoral College votes). However, despite losing their southern base, the Democratic defeat was not a landslide. Republican Nixon only got 43% of the vote compared to 42% for Democrat Humphrey. Humphrey won most of the Northeast, a few states in the Midwest, and one on the West coast.

11) Key, V.O, "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics*, Vol 17, 1955. Burnham, Walter Dean, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, New York, Norton, 1970. Speel, Robert, *Changing Patterns of Voting in the Northern United States: Electoral Realignment 1952-1996*.

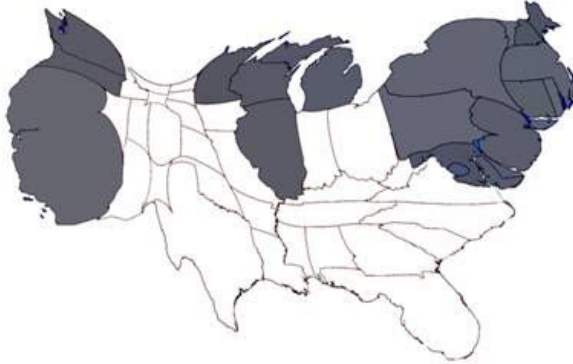
The election of 1968 was a critical election because the pattern established repeated itself in virtually every presidential election since. The “Republican presidential majority” first appeared in this election.¹²⁾ From 1932–1966 the Democrats won 7 of 9 presidential elections and controlled both Houses of Congress 28 of 32 years, establishing themselves as the dominant party. From 1968–2004 the Republicans won 7 of 10 presidential elections. Yet the Democrats held on to control of the House of Representatives continuously from 1954–1994, and the Senate for all but 6 of those years, establish a pattern of “split-level” or “divided” government.

Map 6: 1968 Electoral College Results



12) Phillips, Kevin, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, New Rochelle, NY, Arlington House, 1969. Black, Earl and Merle Black, *The Vital South: How Presidents are Elected*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1992.

Map 7: 2004 Electoral College Results



Source: University of Michigan, Cartogram of 2004 Electoral College, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/>

The “Old System” did reappear once in the 1976 election which put southern Democrat Jimmy Carter in the White House. Carter carried the South in 1976, but he was the last Democrat to do so. In Carter’s reelection campaign the only southern state he carried was his home state of Georgia. The regional pattern in presidential elections set in the 1960s was locked in by the 1980s. It can be seen in every presidential election since 1980. Map 7 shows the 2004 election, which manifests the same pattern.

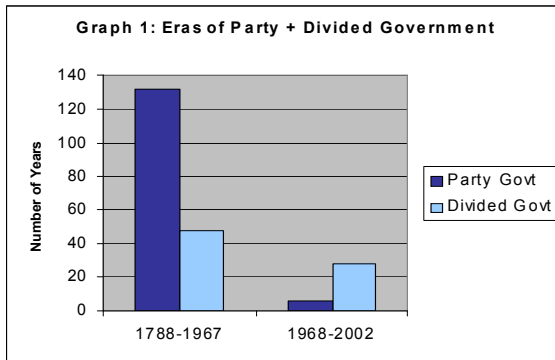
V. The Rise and Fall of Split-level Dealignment

A Republican presidential majority was evident from 1968, however things were different in Congress. From 1968 into the 1990s the party system could best be characterized as undergoing a split level dealignment. A new Republican presidential majority had been created, but the Democrats remained in control of Congress. From 1968–1976 and again

from 1980–1992 the Republicans controlled the presidency but never did they control the House of Representatives and for only six of those 20 years did they win a majority in the Senate.

The erosion of Democratic control of the South below the presidential level was slow, not really being consolidated nationally until the election of 1994 when the Republicans won control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years by winning a majority of seats in the South for the first time in the history of their party. Democratic gains in Congress in the Northeast and Midwest have been more uneven and spread over a longer time period, and seem to be still going on as seen in the election of 2006.

Graph 1 shows that the norm in U.S. history is party government, where one party controls both the presidency and both houses of Congress. The pattern of persistent divided government, where one party controls the presidency and another controls at least one house of Congress is unusual in American history. It did appear from 1876–1896, when the Democrats more often controlled the House of Representatives but the Republicans more often controlled the presidency. However, the run of 28 out of 34 years from 1968–2002 is the longest run of divided government in U.S. history.

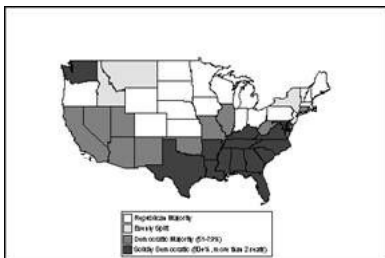


The relative continuity of patterns of partisanship in Congress, despite the changing nature of presidential coalitions, can be seen by comparing the regional outcome of the 79th House of Representatives which served 1945–46 with the 99th House of Representatives which served from 1985–1986. These Houses were chosen because they were near the average number of Democrats serving during this time period and so are good indicators of a normal Democratic majority. The House of Representatives was chosen over the Senate because of the larger sample size and because Senate races often turn on individual personalities.

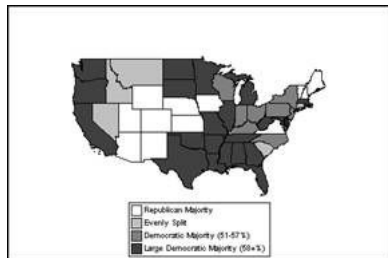
In the 79th House (Map 3), the “Old System” was still completely in effect. The South was solidly Democratic, the Midwest and Northeast were the Republican base, and the West was most competitive. In the 99th House (Map 8) the South was still the Democrats best region, although no longer was their control so monolithic. However, the change in the party system had begun to work its way down to the House races. Democrats were competitive everywhere in the nation. The West was now the Republican’s best region.

Maps 3 + 8: Comparison of Democratic Majorities in House of 1945–46 and 1985–86 (79th and 99th Congresses)

Map 3: Democratic House Majority 1945~46



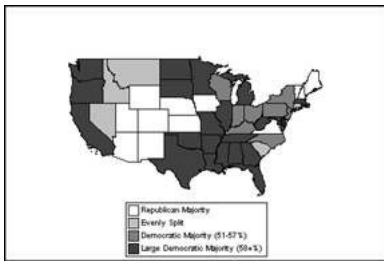
Map 8: Democratic House Majority 1985~86



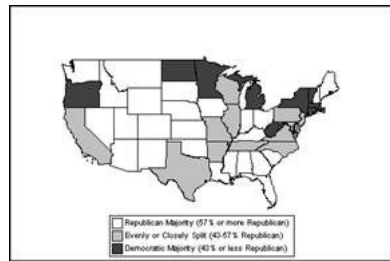
But a regional shift in congressional elections that matched the presidential pattern was not fully manifested until the 1994 midterm election when Republicans won over 50 new seats to become the majority party in the House. The most dramatic election was the 104th House when the Republicans took control. However, the 105th House was just as historically significant because this is the election where most of the freshmen elected in 1994 secured their seats by winning a second time. American history is full of examples of one time surges in party strength in Congress that were washed away in the next election. It is crucial that a party be able to hold on to seats for a second term.

Maps 8 + 9: Comparison of the 1985–86 and 1997–98 U.S. House of Representatives

Map 8: Democratic House Majority 1985~86



Map 8: Democratic House Majority 1997~98

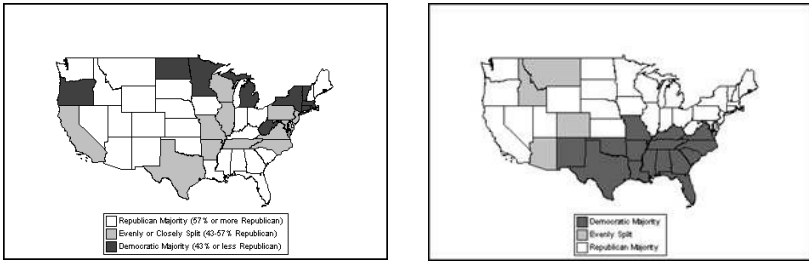


Comparing the regional bases of the 105th House (Map 9) with the 99th House, the Republicans took away the Democrats’ base in the South even as they consolidated their base in the West. By 1997, the Democrats were now strongest in the Northeast and Midwest both in Congress and in the Electoral College. So in the Clinton reelection of 1996 the congressional parties finally aligned themselves with the presidential patterns. The “split-level” alignment was over, although divided government went on

because the parties had become so evenly matched and the growing number of independent voters and ticket-splitters could swing elections at all levels. The distance of the new pattern from the old system can be seen in comparing the regional base of new Republican majority with the last Republican majority in the 83rd House elected in 1952 during the Eisenhower landslide (Map 10).

Maps 9 + 10: The Different Republican Majorities: 1997-98 vs. 1953-54

Map 9: Republican House Majority 1997-98 Map 10: The Republican House Majority 1953-54



VI. The Second Wave of Polarization in the Era of Dealignment

The regional shift was to some extent an outcome set off by the polarization of the parties in the 1960s over issues like civil rights, the Vietnam War, and a series of new social issues. However, the second wave of political polarization that began in the 1990s was more an effect of the earlier regional shift finally being completed at the congressional level.

It is widely recognized by pundits that politics in Washington has become more shrill and partisan since the election of the Republican majority in 1994.¹³⁾ The loss of the solid South by the Democrats is also

widely commented upon, although their somewhat offsetting gains in the Northeast and Midwest are not as often recognized. The very concept of conservative southern Democrats or liberal northern Republicans is fading from memory so their disappearance is rarely mentioned anymore. Thus the interaction between the polarization of the parties and the regional shift is becoming less visible and less well known.

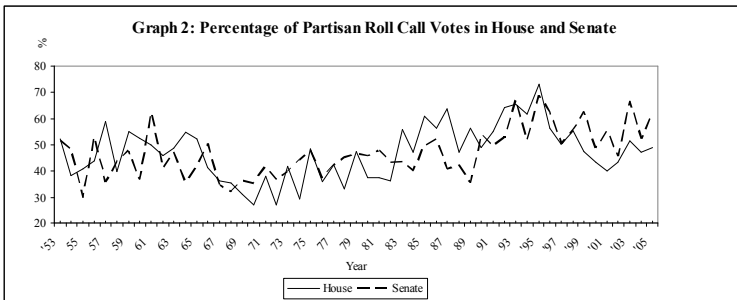
To too many contemporary politicians and pundits, polarization of the parties only begins with the confrontation between newly elected Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich and President Clinton in 1995–96. But the polarization of the parties, in interaction with the regional shift, has been going on for almost half a century.

Historically, the regional divisions in the parties resulted in disunity of their congressional parties. American congressional parties have often been contrasted to European parliamentary parties for their lack of party loyalty, even on key votes. For half a century *Congressional Quarterly* has kept three statistics that measure the level of partisanship in Congress: 1. the percentage of partisan roll call votes, 2. party unity scores, and 3. the number of times a party votes unanimously on a roll call vote (against a majority of the other party).

A partisan roll call vote is when a majority of Democrats vote against a majority of Republicans on a bill where each member's vote is tallied for the record. Graph 2 shows that from 1954 through 1982, most roll call

13) Eilperin, Juliet, *Fight Club Politics: How Partisanship is Poisoning the House of Representatives*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2007. Mann, Thomas and Bruce Cain, ed., *Party Lines: Competition, Partisanship, and Congressional Redistricting*, Washington, DC. Brookings Institution Press, 2005. Mann, Thomas and Norman Ornstein, 2006, *The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing American and How to Get It Back on Track*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007. Sinclair, Barbara, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress*, Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2007.

votes are not “partisan.”¹⁴⁾ The majority of Republicans do not oppose the majority of Democrats. Rather, a majority of both parties both voted on the winning side. In some years, mostly in the 1950s and early 60s the percentage of partisan votes rises in to the 50s, reaching a high of 62% in the Senate in 1961. However, the general tendency is against partisan roll calls, with the House falling as low as in the upper 20s in the 1970s.

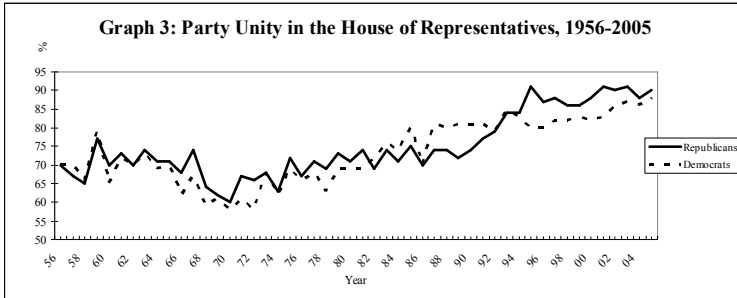


Source: Congressional Almanac 2005

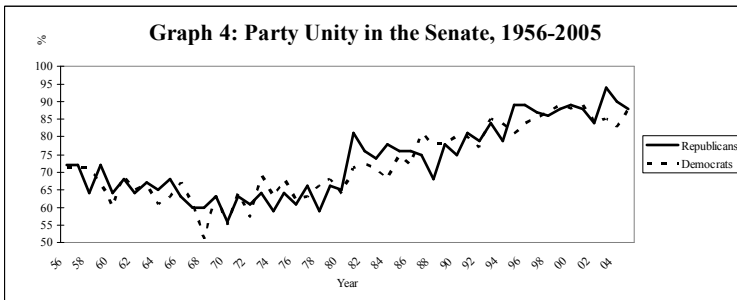
Party unity scores measure the percentage of members of a party that vote together on a partisan roll call vote. An average score near 100 means almost all members voted together almost all the time. An average score of 60 means that on average 40% of the party voted against the party majority. Again, Graphs 3 and 4 show that party unity scores are low from 1956–1980.¹⁵⁾ They generally range from 60–70. Scores were a bit higher in the House, surpassing 70 a bit more often, while scores in the Senate fell below 60 a bit more often.

14) *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 2005.

15) *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 2005.



Source: *Congressional Almanac 2005*



Source: *Congressional Almanac 2005*

Because both parties had members in each region of the country (except Republicans were very weak in the South until the 1980s), the issues that split the nation tended to split the parties in Congress. As the regional shift progressed, the parties became more regionally and ideologically coherent. By the 1980s partisanship in Congress was growing as measured by indexes of party voting. The Republican takeover of Congress in 1995, which consolidated the regional shift at the congressional level, ushered in an era of the highest levels of partisanship in the data set up until then.

Things began to change with the election of Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980 whose consistently conservative policies made him a polarizing

figure. First, Republicans tended to unite around Reaganomics and Reagan's new budget priorities. Later, as the consequences of conservative policies began to be felt, Democrats grew more united in opposing the Presidents Reagan and later his successor George H. W. Bush. For the first two years some House Democrats, particularly in the South or conservative rural districts, were leery of opposing the new president who was popular in their districts, but from 1983–1992, the yearly average of partisan votes was 55.5% of all roll calls in the House and 46% in the Senate, much higher than the overall average.

Partisanship took a new bump when the economy fell into recession before the 1992 election and even more when Bill Clinton became the first Democrat elected president in 12 years and only the second in 24 years. Because he was their first president in quite some time, Democrats tended to unite behind him more than usual, and conservative Republicans, who had come to think of the presidency as their domain, tended to unite against him more than usual.

In 1993 partisan roll calls were more common than at any time yet in this data set in both the House and Senate, and party unity scores reached the highest point yet. The total number of unanimous votes by Democrats approached double the highest previous data point, with Republicans more than exceeding double any previous year in their unanimous votes.

Partisanship really surged with the Republican takeover of Congress in 1995. Republicans had control of the House for the first time in 40 years and they were determined to use it. Years out of power, suffering at the hands of the arrogant Democratic majority, steeled the Republicans to exercise their new-found control with discipline.

Moreover, the regional shift that had begun at the presidential level with the Nixon elections and been cemented with the Reagan victories was now matched at the congressional level. 19 of the 52 new Republicans swept in

by the 1994 landslide were from the ideologically conservative South, including Speaker Newt Gingrich. The once solidly Democratic South now was represented by a majority of Republicans in the House and Senate. Buoyed by the new highly conservative southerners and unbound from their now virtually extinct liberal northern brethren, the Republicans were more ideologically united than at any time in the 20th century.

In 1995 partisanship hits new highs and sets many records for the entire data set. The frequency of partisan roll calls reaches all-time highs of 73% in the House and 69% in the Senate. Republicans in the House set their all-time high of 91% party unity, Republicans in the Senate are at 89%. Democrats cannot match Republican unity but are at previously unusual highs of 80% in the House and 81% in the Senate. Unanimous votes on partisan roll calls double the 1993 previous high and nearly quadruple any previous year in the data set. Republicans voted unanimously over 250 times, roughly three times as often as either party before the 1990s.

The new level of partisanship can be seen in the battle over the budget between new Republican House Speaker Gingrich and Democratic President Clinton. Gingrich and the new Republican House majority were largely united in their determination to substantially cut social spending after decades of what they saw as Democratic profligacy. Democrats, although stunned to find themselves in the minority, were similarly united in defending the programs they and their predecessors had passed or at least in not letting the Republicans run roughshod over them.

The defining issue in this conflict became the national budget. Officially due by October 1, as often was the case, key votes on the 1996 budget were delayed in Congress. What was new was the intense level of partisan wrangling over the basic priorities of the budget, and President Clinton's repeated threats to veto the budget bills the Republican majority was

crafting. When House Republicans chose confrontation over compromise Clinton did in fact veto four key budget bills that had passed on nearly unanimous party line votes.¹⁶⁾ House Republicans, knowing they didn't have the votes to win, still chose to try to override three of the vetoes, trying to place the blame on the president. When the budget impasse dragged on into late December, most federal workers were sent home for lack of funds to pay them. Funds were temporarily voted, but ran out again in January, prompting a second government shutdown. Senate Republicans eventually led the way to compromise, but never before (or since) has such partisan bitterness shut down the national government.

1995 set a new pattern of partisan polarization in the U.S. Congress. While the frequency of partisan roll call votes fell back closer to normal for the data set in the House, particularly by 1999, from 1996–2005 they ranged from 46–67% in the Senate, much higher than the historical norm. Only in 2003 did the total number of unanimous votes reach the same level as 1995. However, the lowest data point of unanimous votes after 1995 is almost double the highest data point before the 1990s. 1995 was the high water mark of partisanship, but it set a new pattern that has persisted until today.

Party unity scores, in particular, have stayed in a new high range. Since 1996, Republicans in both Houses have only fallen below a party unity score of 85 once (Republican Senators in 2002), and have scored as high as 91 in the House and 94 in the Senate. Democrats are a little less unified than Republicans but still quite high by previous standards. Democrats in both Houses range from 80–89 in party unity scores.

The impact of the regional shift on dynamics in Congress can be seen in the difference between the way Presidents Reagan in 1981 and Bush in

16) Conley, Richard, *President Clinton and the Republican Congress 1995–2000: Vetoes, Veto Threats, and Legislative Strategy*, San Francisco, CA: American Political Science Association National Convention, 2001, pp. 17–29.

2001 passed their first year legislative package, including tax cuts and reordering of spending priorities, through Congress. In 1981 there were still a large number of conservative southern Democrats in Congress and a few northern liberal Republicans as well. Reagan joined forces with 40–50 southern Democrats to pass his new budget priorities (the number varied depending on the particular vote). Republicans could still mobilize their “conservative coalition” with southern Democrats to succeed in Congress even though some liberal northern Republicans defected.

However, when George W. Bush came to power in 2001 pursuing similar priorities, the congressional landscape was different. There were very few conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans. Party line voting was now much more the norm. President Bush had a narrow majority in the House and 49 votes in the Senate. He passed his economic and budget plans by unanimity or near unanimity by Republicans and recruiting a small number of Senate Democrats from conservative states who would be risking their seats by so publicly opposing the president so early in his term.

Thus, since the early 1980s there has been a secular trend toward greater partisan polarization in Congress. Partisan polarization has risen under certain conditions, but it has not receded much when those conditions no longer apply. Partisan polarization rose under the ideologically conservative President Reagan but it did not recede under more moderate Republican George H. W. Bush. Partisan polarization hit an all-time high in 1995 as the new Republican majority flexed its muscles against Democrat Clinton. While partisanship has never quite matched the highs of that extraordinary year, partisanship has been significantly higher since 1995 than at any other time in a data set that spans half a century.

VII. The Regional Shift and the 2006 Congressional Election

The regional shift continues in less dramatic form today. In the 2006 midterm election the Democrats took back control of Congress mostly by winning seats in Northeast and Midwest. Four of the six Senate seats the Democrats picked up came from the Northeast (2) and Midwest (2). Map 11 shows 21 of the 31 House seats the Democrats gained came from those two regions. The other Democratic gains in the House were mainly in the Southwest, many in districts with large numbers of Latino voters.

Map 11: House Seats Turning from Republican to Democratic in 2006



Dark blue = 3-5 Democratic seats gained

Light blue = 1-2 Democratic seats gained

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections-in-the-United-States>

VIII. Conclusion

Ideological polarization and regional voting patterns are perennial issues in the study of American politics. Contemporary research in American political science tends to focus somewhat myopically on the ideological polarization that surfaced so dramatically with the historical Republican

takeover of Congress in 1994, based on new Republican majorities in the South. So explanation of current partisan polarization tends to focus on variables that are prominent in the 1990s such as the 1994 ideological shift to the right, the rising prevalence of primary competition in congressional races, the new pattern of gerrymandering in state legislatures to maximize safe seats, the decline of nonpartisan network news in favor of sensationalist and partisan niche news programming, etc. No doubt these variables are important, just as the development of the internet as a major tool of political communication will be in the future. But both ideological polarization and the regional shift have much longer histories that point to deeper and harder to measure societal and cultural trends. Only macrohistorical analysis can put together the bigger, longer-term picture.

As has been shown, the ideological polarization that surfaced in the 1990s was only the second wave, the first beginning in the 1960s with the civil rights movement and the series of subsequent protest movements, and their effects on social and political systems. The first wave of ideological polarization transformed U.S. presidential politics and triggered a slow, but huge regional realignment, affecting the geographical bases of both political parties. As this regional shift increasingly affected congressional elections, by the 1990s ideological polarization intensified in Congress, ushering in the second wave which dominates the consciousness of contemporary politicians, pundits, and less historically aware political scientists.

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Abstract

Partisan Polarization in Congress and the Historic Shift
in the Geographical Bases of U.S. Political Parties

Dennis Florig

From the 1960s into the 21st century the American party system underwent two major transformations that were tightly interlinked—the ideological polarization of the parties and the regional shift of the party system. This paper uses a macrohistorical approach supported by an innovative method of analyzing long-term Electoral College and congressional election data to empirically demonstrate the two-way causal relationship between the ideological polarization of the parties and the unusually slow but eventually complete regional realignment of the U.S. party system. The ideological polarization so prominent since the 1990s actually began in the 1960s, first with intensifying ideological conflict in presidential races, which then set off a shift in the regional bases of the political parties, and which eventually culminated with more cohesive party voting and fierce ideological battles in Congress.

Key words : U.S. political parties , U.S. Congress , Partisan polarization,
Realignment , Political geography

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