

**American University Conference on “American Gridlock: Causes, Characteristics, and  
Consequences of Polarization  
Keynote Address on Congress and Polarization  
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Our country hasn't had this much knowledge and understanding of polarization gathered in one room since Abraham Lincoln dined alone.

It's been a productive and interesting morning and I am sure the afternoon will follow suit. Think of this session as a break from the serious stuff, something like a Darrell Issa oversight hearing: bombastic, contentious, accusatory, unconstrained by facts and evidence.

Actually, I hope it's not as bad as that, but some of you may feel I stray a bit too far from the scholarly terrain of this conference and sound too much like a Washington pundit, one whose self-confidence greatly outweighs his knowledge and understanding.

But gimme a break. I've lived and worked in DC for 45 years – it's bound to have had some effect on me. So here goes.

A few months ago The Monkey Cage commissioned and published a series of short essays on polarization, kicked off by an overview written by Nolan McCarty, which summarized the findings of an APSA study group (on which I and several others in the room served). I think Nolan fairly reflected majority views of polarization within the scholarly community. What followed in the ensuing days and weeks was a rich offering of the research perspectives of colleagues, many by participants in this conference. Lots of interesting work on polarization is being done and our knowledge is increasing. Much of that work is being discussed here today.

**Professional discomfort with polarization**

What I would like to address today, however, is what I see as our professional discomfort with and reluctance to take seriously the widespread public views that our political system is dangerously broken. I understand and sympathize with that defensive posture, one I've embraced most of my professional life. I've spent decades in Washington explaining and defending the American constitutional system in the face of what I considered to be uninformed and ill-considered attacks on Congress and our way of governing.

After all, the problems our country confronts are immensely difficult, other democracies struggle as we do trying to deal with them, we've overcome similar periods of subpar performance and political dysfunction throughout our history, and our political system has adapted to new circumstances and self-corrected.

But there's something else going on here: how would we justify ourselves if we didn't contest the conventional wisdom of mere pundits and journalists? We have a positive political science to conduct and are properly critical of half-baked diagnoses and ungrounded normative speculations on how to cure our governing maladies.

But I believe these times are strikingly different from what we have seen in the past and the health and well-being of our democracy is properly a matter of great concern. We owe it to ourselves and our country to reconsider our priors and at least entertain the possibility that these concerns are justified, even if for us uncomfortably so.

### **Mostly consensus views of important developments**

Let's start with some basics.

- The parties in Congress are as polarized—internally unified and distinctive from one another – as any time in history. This holds for both House and Senate, and most state legislatures. It also holds for an electorate that Gary Jacobson reports was in the 2012 elections the most polarized ever (or at least since the start of ANES in 1952).
- The fit between ideology and party is unusually strong. As Hans Noel argues in his new book, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in American History*, for perhaps the first time in American history, the two dominant ideologies have captured the two dominant political parties. The path to polarization, he argues, originated neither among elected officials nor the mass public but instead developed over a long period of time with key roles played by ideological thinkers and political activists with policy demands.
- Under divided government and split chamber control, the current Congress has ceased to operate as an effective legislative body. Deliberation and compromise are scarce commodities, not the coin of the realm. The contemporary Congress bears little resemblance to the “textbook Congress” or “the reform Congress” that followed. Individual members are no longer the most useful unit of analysis for understanding congressional behavior and policymaking. Parties are the key actors and they respond more to their activist bases than to the median voter.

- Public approval of the performance of Congress and public trust in government to respond to their needs have plunged to record depths.
- While a causal connection between inequality and polarization is uncertain, growing concerns about economic and political inequality are rooted in real increases in the concentration of income, wealth and opportunities for political influence.

### **More controversial arguments about polarization**

These are not controversial assertions. Now on to the often more disputed aspects of the polarization story.

- The most important and problematic feature of today’s polarization is its partisan character. To treat polarization as “mere sorting” is to trivialize if not miss entirely the biggest and most significant development in American politics in recent decades.
- That polarization reflects first of all the striking ideological differences between the parties, evident most sharply in the behavior of elected officials at national and state levels and among party activists but also clearly evident among voters. The level of constraint (consistency in policy preferences) in the ideological views of voters has increased markedly since Philip Converse described “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” over a half century ago.
- But partisan polarization reflects more than sincere ideological differences. The rough parity between the parties fuels an intense competition for control of the White House and Congress. The stakes for control are particularly high because the ideological differences and policy demands between the vast party networks are large and the chances of gaining or maintaining control are realistic because of the competitiveness of the parties. This leads to strategic agenda setting and voting, what Frances Lee calls partisan team play, even on issues with little or no ideological content, an expansion of the permanent campaign into an institutionalized partisan messaging war in Congress, and a tribalism (what scholars often call affective partisan polarization) that is now such a prominent feature of American politics.
- The linkage of party and ideology has given us “more responsible parties” and with it the promise of more clarity and accountability for voters. But when embedded in

our constitutional system it can be a formula for willful obstruction and policy irresolution. That is precisely the outcome Austin Ranney forecast in his prophetic dissent to the famous 1950 American Political Science Association Report entitled “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System.” Ranney powerfully argued that more ideologically coherent, internally unified, and adversarial parties in the fashion of Westminster-style parliamentary democracy would be a disaster within the American constitutional system, given our separation of powers, separately elected institutions, and constraints on majority rule that favor cross-party coalitions and compromise.

- That mismatch between our parties and governing institutions is made even more problematic by another feature of our contemporary politics: **The polarization is asymmetric.** Republicans have become a radical insurgency: ideological extreme, contemptuous of the inherited policy regime, scornful of compromise, unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition. The evidence of this asymmetry is overwhelming:

Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal provide the strongest evidence for this asymmetry among members of Congress with their use of overlapping cohorts in the first dimension of DW-NOMINATE scores. They find that the ideological distance between the parties grew dramatically since the 1970s but that it would be a mistake to equate the two parties’ roles in contemporary political polarization. “(T)he data are clear that this is a Republican-led phenomenon where very conservative Republicans have replaced moderate Republicans and Southern Democrats.” The rise of the Tea Party moved the Republican Party even further from the political center.

This striking party asymmetry measured by congressional roll call behavior is also present in state legislatures, as will be discussed this afternoon.

But the evidence for asymmetry goes well beyond roll call voting. Changing Republican Party positions on taxes, Keynesian economics, immigration, climate change and the environment, health care, science policy, and a host of cultural policies are consistent with the same pattern. So too are the embrace of hard-ball strategies and tactics involving parliamentary-like opposition, the rise of the 60-vote Senate, government shutdowns, debt ceiling hostage-taking, and nullification efforts not seen since the anti-bellum South. Historian Gregory Kabaservice in *Rule and Ruin* traces the key intellectual and political developments in the

transformation of the GOP from Eisenhower to the Tea Party. In *The Party Is Over*, former Republican congressional staffer Mike Lofgren provides a rich and colorful insider's perspective on the radicalization of the Republican party in Congress. And Norm Ornstein and I in *It's Even Worse Than It Looks* document how the asymmetry developed from Newt Gingrich in the 1980s to The Young Guns in the present.

Finally, given the salience of the racial and cultural divides in the new party coalitions, it should not be surprising that asymmetric polarization has found its way to the public. Republican Party voters are more skewed to their ideological pole than Democratic party voters are to theirs.

Polarization is indeed asymmetric yet many political scientists, like most mainstream journalists and political reformers, refuse to even acknowledge or take seriously the case for this assertion. It makes us uncomfortable framing an argument that some will characterize as partisan, even if it more accurately captures the reality of the contemporary party system. We (as well as mainstream media) do the public a disservice to say less than we believe to be true and avoid research directions that might produce "unbalanced" results. Insisting on false equivalence in the media or the academy is no virtue.

One final point about polarization.

- Apart from the substantial minority of citizens who never vote and whose lives are fully detached from politics and public affairs, we are indeed a Red and Blue nation. Alan Abramowitz's characterization of the current era of electoral competition is in my view dead on: intense two-party competition for control, increasing one-party domination of states and congressional districts, and consistency of election results across levels and over time.

### **An outdated literature?**

Much of what we have written about parties and Congress doesn't fit contemporary conditions. As John Zaller, Seth Masket and their colleagues from UCLA have theorized and demonstrated, parties are less collectives of election-minded politicians responding to the median voter than networks including interest groups, activists and donors with clear policy demands. The imprint of these networks on the public has weakened the argument that voters are mostly moderate, pragmatic and independent.

Districts voting for presidential and House candidates of different parties are vanishing. So too are states with U.S. senators representing both parties. Divided party government is today a formula for inaction, not an opportunity for bipartisan legislating.

So there is no reason to be smug about our past research findings or certain that we've seen it all before. Plenty of evidence suggests we have a serious mismatch between our "more responsible parties" and our constitutional system, especially when one of those parties is hell-bent on replacing, not amending to fit current conditions, a century's worth of policy development.

### **What to do?**

But what we know from our research is that there is no easy way out of the mess we are in.

Change our institutions to fit our new-style parties? Beyond reining in the Senate filibuster, this would entail far-reaching constitutional reform that is likely to remain in the realm of intellectual debate.

Alter the electoral system to produce somewhat less polarized parties? Lots of ideas worth pursuing in the states but short of major changes such as compulsory voting or some form of PR, the evidence suggests that they would produce at best modest results.

Encourage independent or third-party candidates appealing to a vast moderate center in American politics? Been there. Done that. A definite nonstarter.

More wishful thinking about delegation to nonpartisan or bipartisan groups? Enough already!

Perhaps more promising are approaches that focus directly on the parties as they exist within our constitutional system. These parties are deeply and asymmetrically polarized, each anchored in a worldview and coalitions of interests and activists, and likely to stay that way for some time to come. Under these conditions, unified party government seems an essential first step, one that can sustain itself in office long enough to put in place and begin to implement a credible governing program. The second is nudging the Republican party back into a genuinely conservative, not radical party, one a little more pragmatic and a little less ideological, one that aspires to win presidential as well as congressional elections over the long haul. The third is dampening the intense and unrelenting competition for control of Congress and the White House, which is itself an historical anomaly.

With demographic changes continuing to unfold to the benefit of the Democrats, it is not hard to see them retaining and increasing their advantage in presidential elections. Controlling the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue is more challenging. Democrats might have an opportunity to regain unified control in 2016, if the 2014 midterm elections leave them within grasp of Senate and House majorities two years later. But holding those majorities in 2018 would be an even more difficult task.

How about another run of unified Republican party government, one that isn't discredited like George W. Bush's by unpopular wars and a financial collapse, and finds its way to a politically and substantively sustainable program for governing? Some argue the best way to bring the Republican Party back to reality is to put it in charge and fully accountable for its actions. Others fear the policy consequences of unconstrained extremism.

Perhaps a more reliable way of bringing the Republican Party back into the mainstream is a few more decisive presidential elections defeats. That might create the conditions for the emergence of new Republican ideas less detached from reality and new efforts among some coalition partners to challenge extremist forces in primary elections.

I don't know what the answer is, or even if there is one. But I do know that in spite of a lot of terrific research we still have work to do fully diagnosing our strikingly dysfunctional government and speaking forthrightly in the public what we believe to be true.