

# *The Polarization of American Politics*

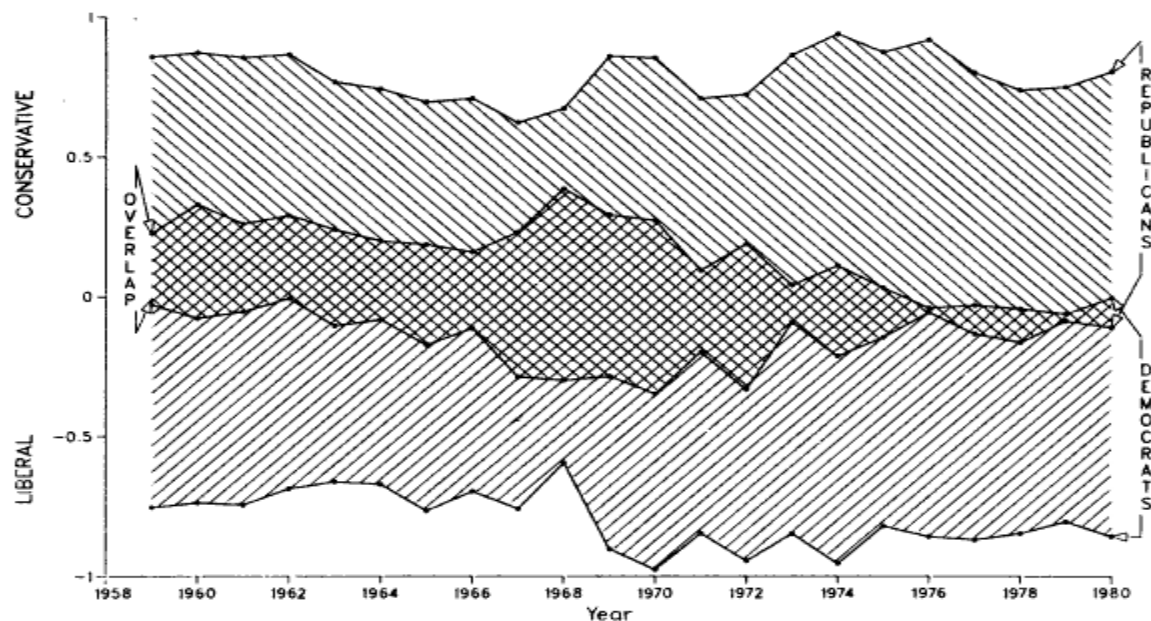
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Elected officials in the United States appear to represent relatively extreme support coalitions rather than the interests of middle-of-the-road voters. This contention is supported by analysis of variance of liberal-conservative positions in the United States Senate from 1959 to 1980. Within both the Democratic and the Republican parties, there is considerable variation in liberal-conservative positions, but two senators from the same state and party tend to be very similar. In contrast, senators from the same state but from different parties are highly dissimilar, suggesting that each party represents an extreme support coalition in the state. Moreover, the distribution of senators is now consistent with the hypothesis that, in the long run, both parties have an equal chance of winning any seat in the Senate. This result suggests that there is now competition between equally balanced but extreme support coalitions throughout most of the United States.

**W**e contend that, at nearly every level of the political system, American politics has been polarized in ways that do not well represent the interests of middle-of-the-road voters. For better or for worse, constituencies are generally fought over by two opposing coalitions, liberal and conservative, each with relatively extreme views. The middle-of-the-road voter is thus not a member of a silent majority desiring some radical social change, but a moderate individual seeking to avoid the wide

FIGURE 8  
ONE STANDARD DEVIATION BANDS FOR ALL PARTY MEMBERS

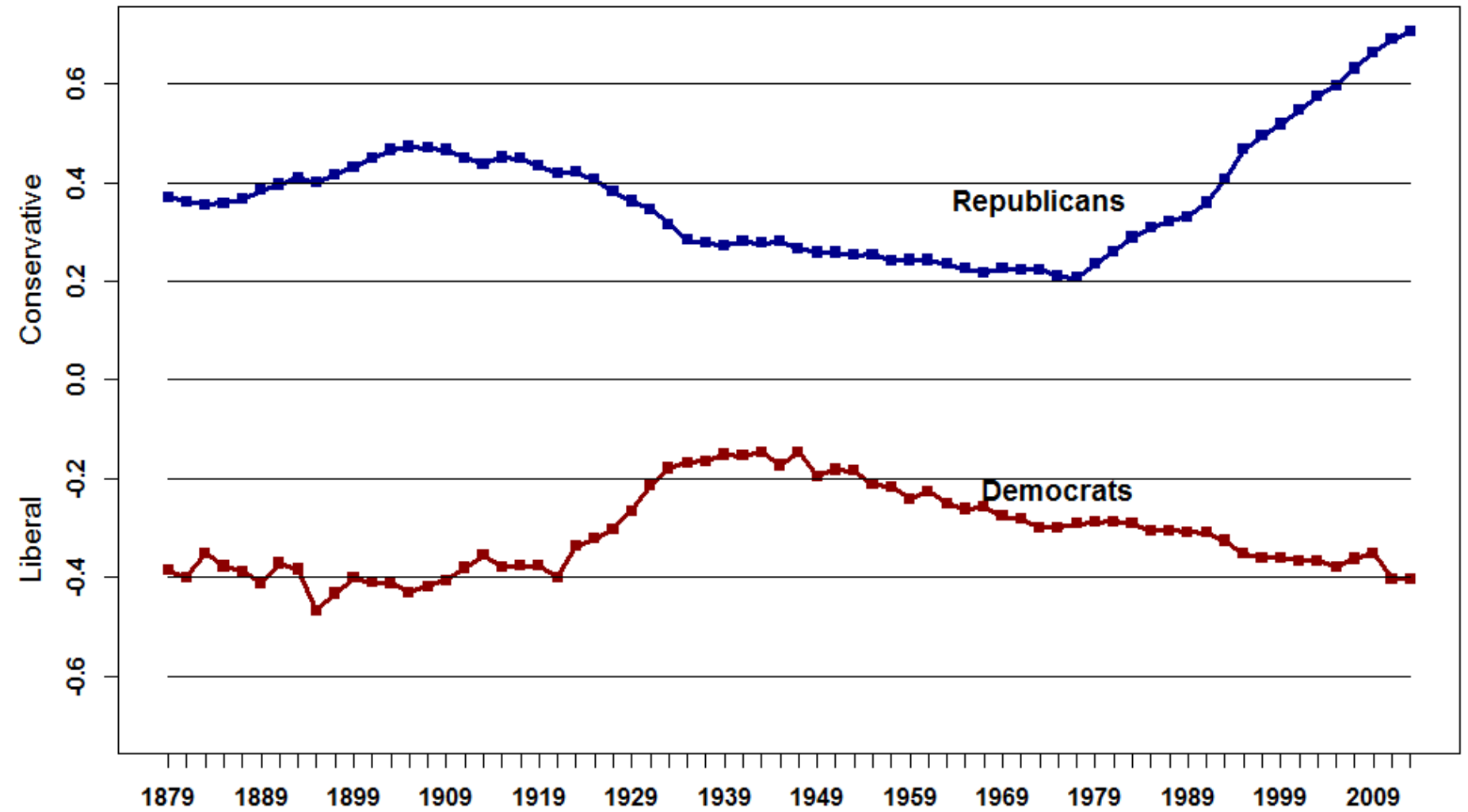


The polarization of the positions of individual senators in terms of their support coalition's interests may have muted policy consequences if liberals and conservatives are balanced in the Senate. However, the scales can tip. Recent work, based on the alternative roll-call method described above, shows that eighteen senators serving in the 95th Congress had replacements in the 96th Congress whose average position was three-fourths of a unit more conservative on our two-unit scale. This shift is hardly unrelated to the shift in economic policy brought about by the Reagan administration.

The trend to polarized competition that can sustain substantial shifts in policy is partly the consequence of the disappearance of traditional

# House 1879-2013

## Party Means on Liberal-Conservative Dimension



# H Party Mean Trends

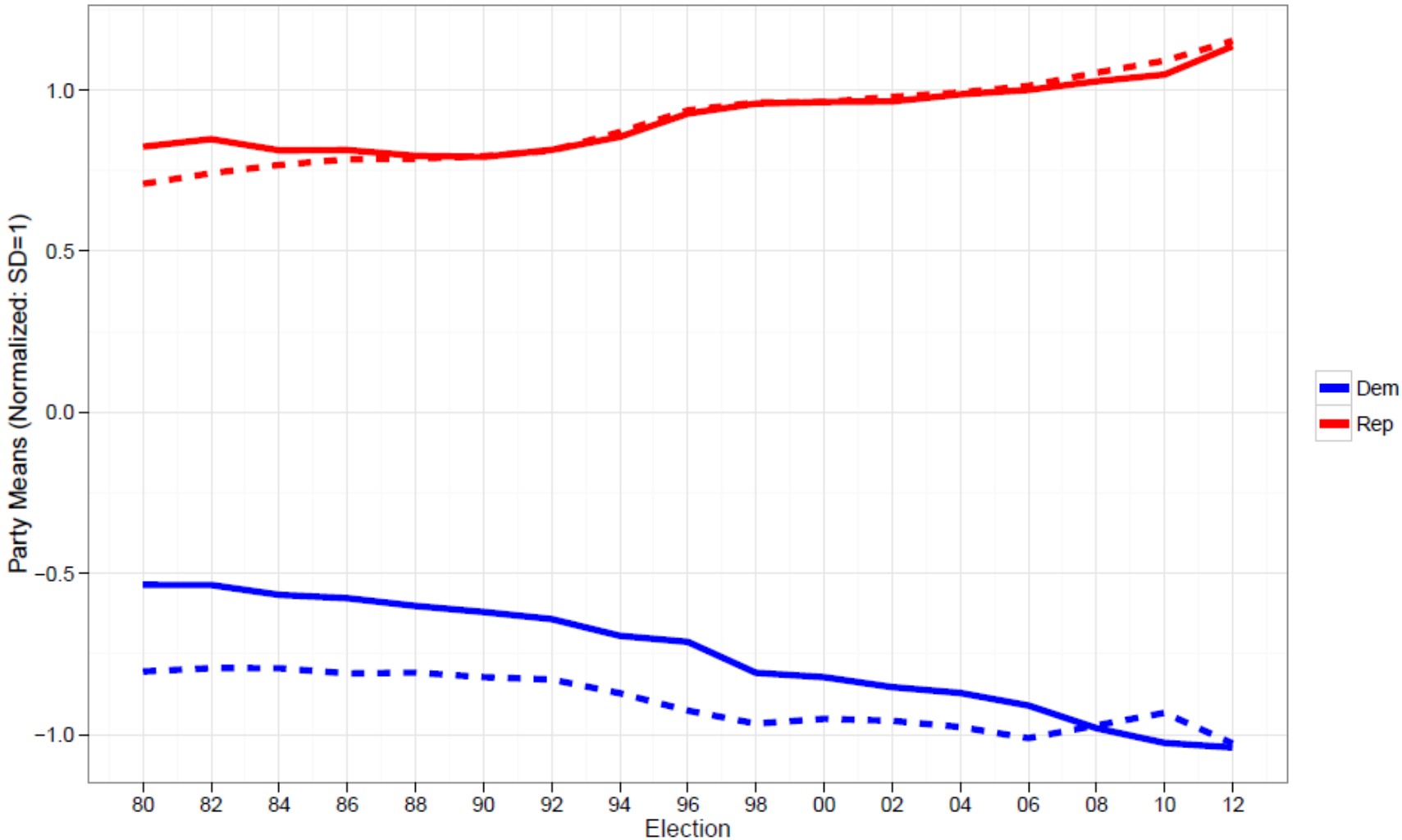
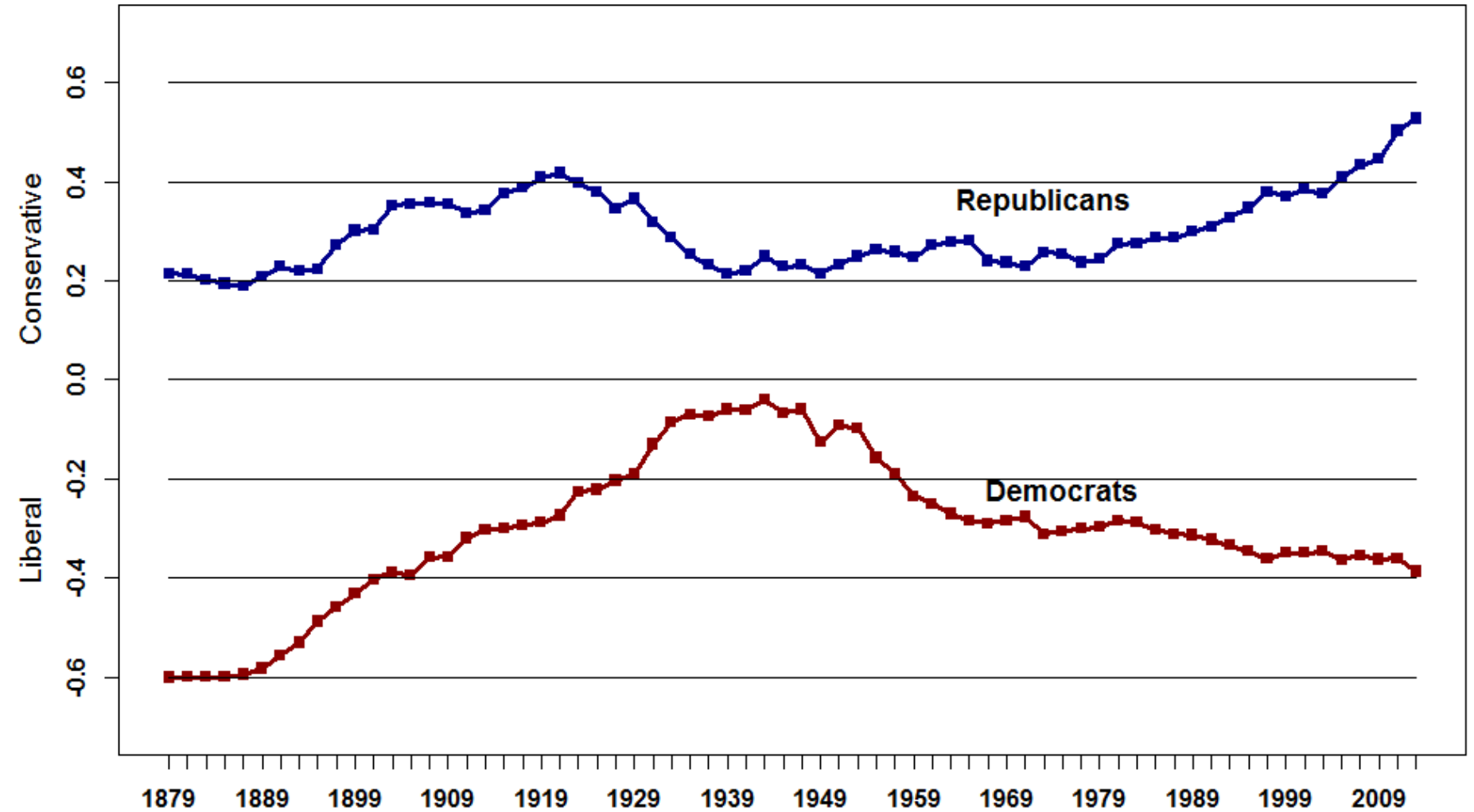


Figure 8. Comparison of Partisan Trends from CFscores and DW-NOMINATE

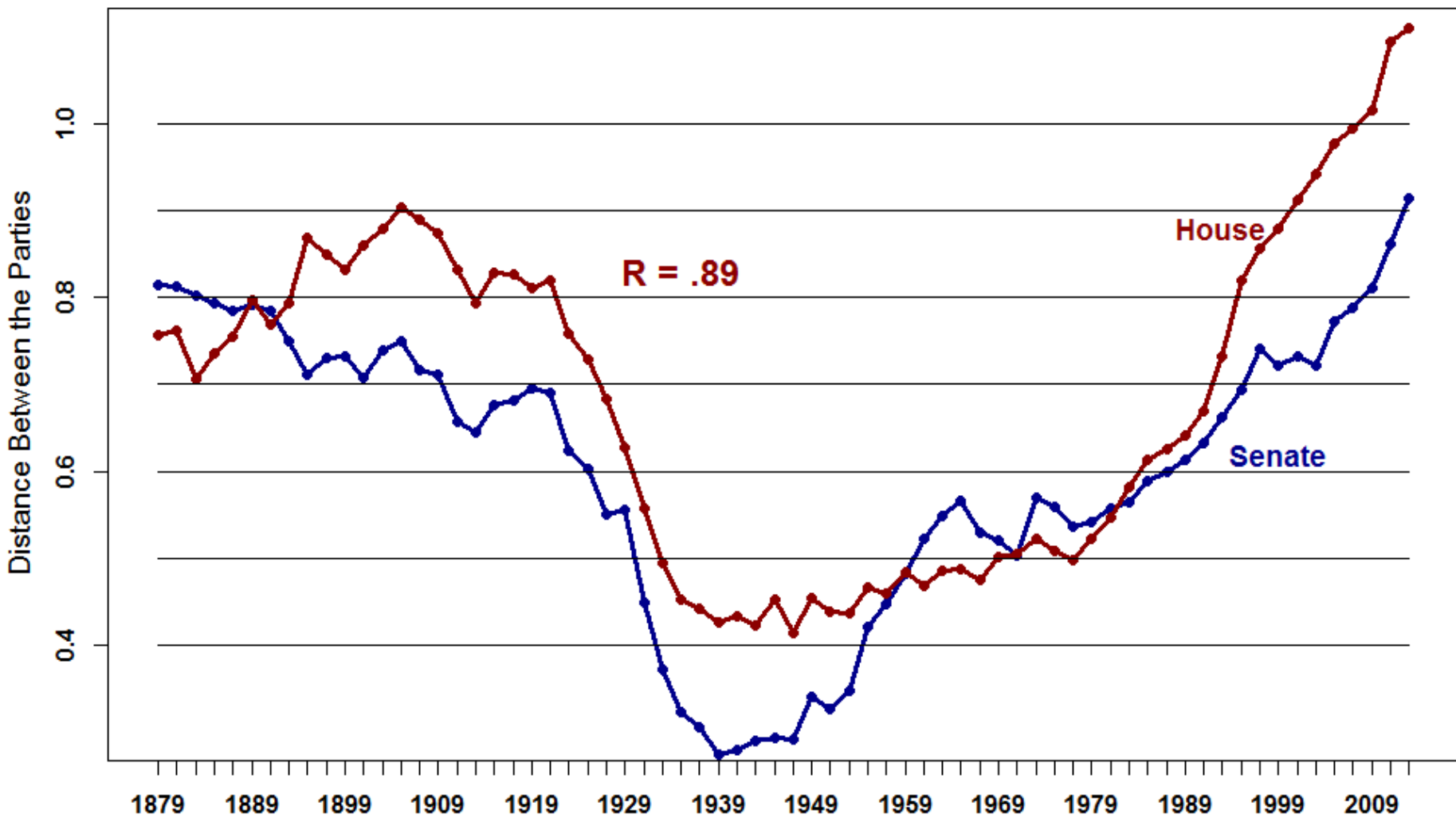
Note: The solid lines are the CFscore party mean and the dotted lines are the DW-NOMINATE party means. Both measures have been commonly rescaled to facilitate meaningful comparisons.

# Senate 1879-2013

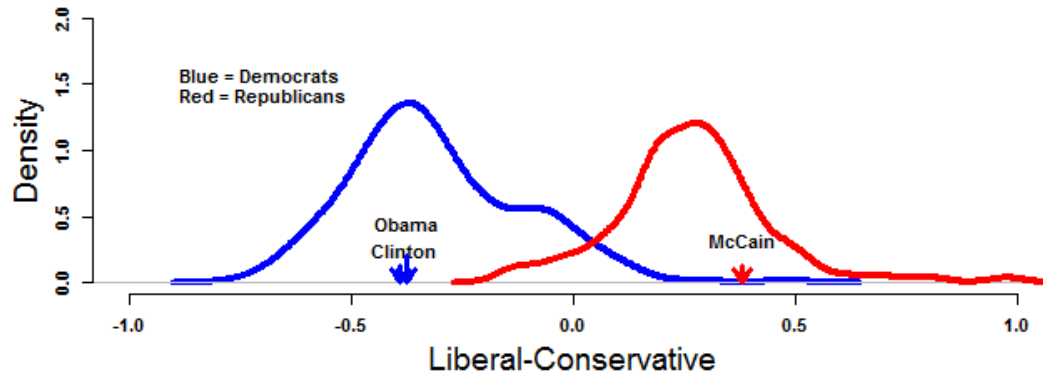
## Party Means on Liberal-Conservative Dimension



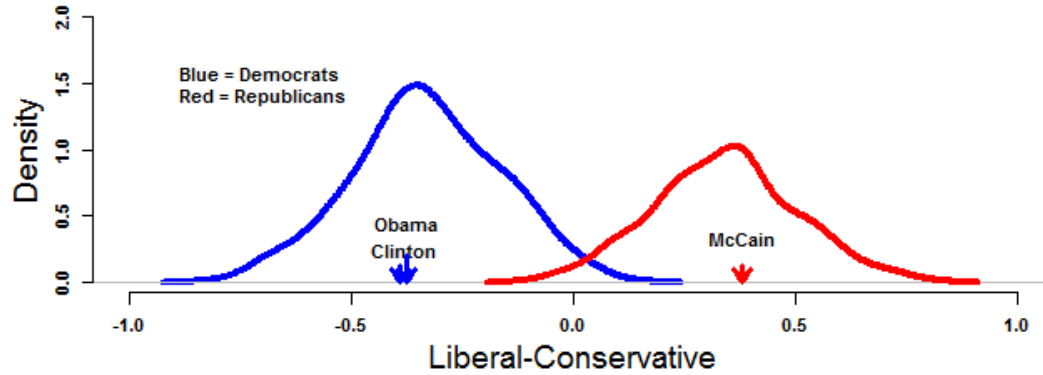
Party Polarization 1879-2013  
Distance Between the Parties First Dimension



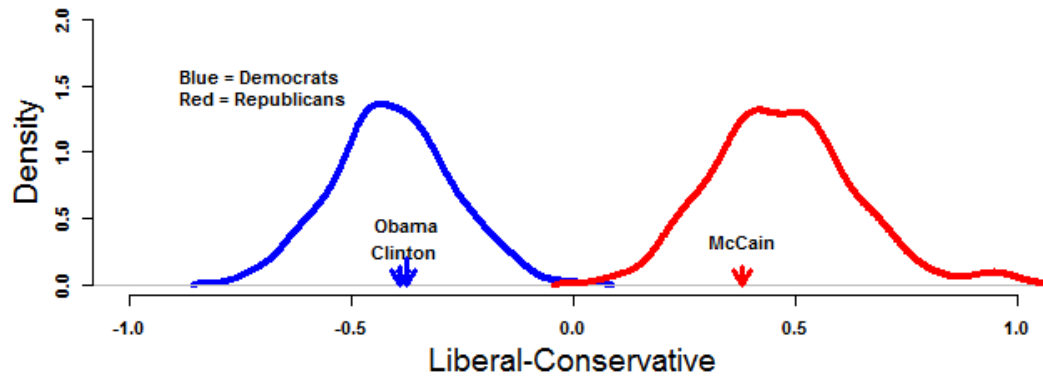
### 92nd (1971-72) Congress



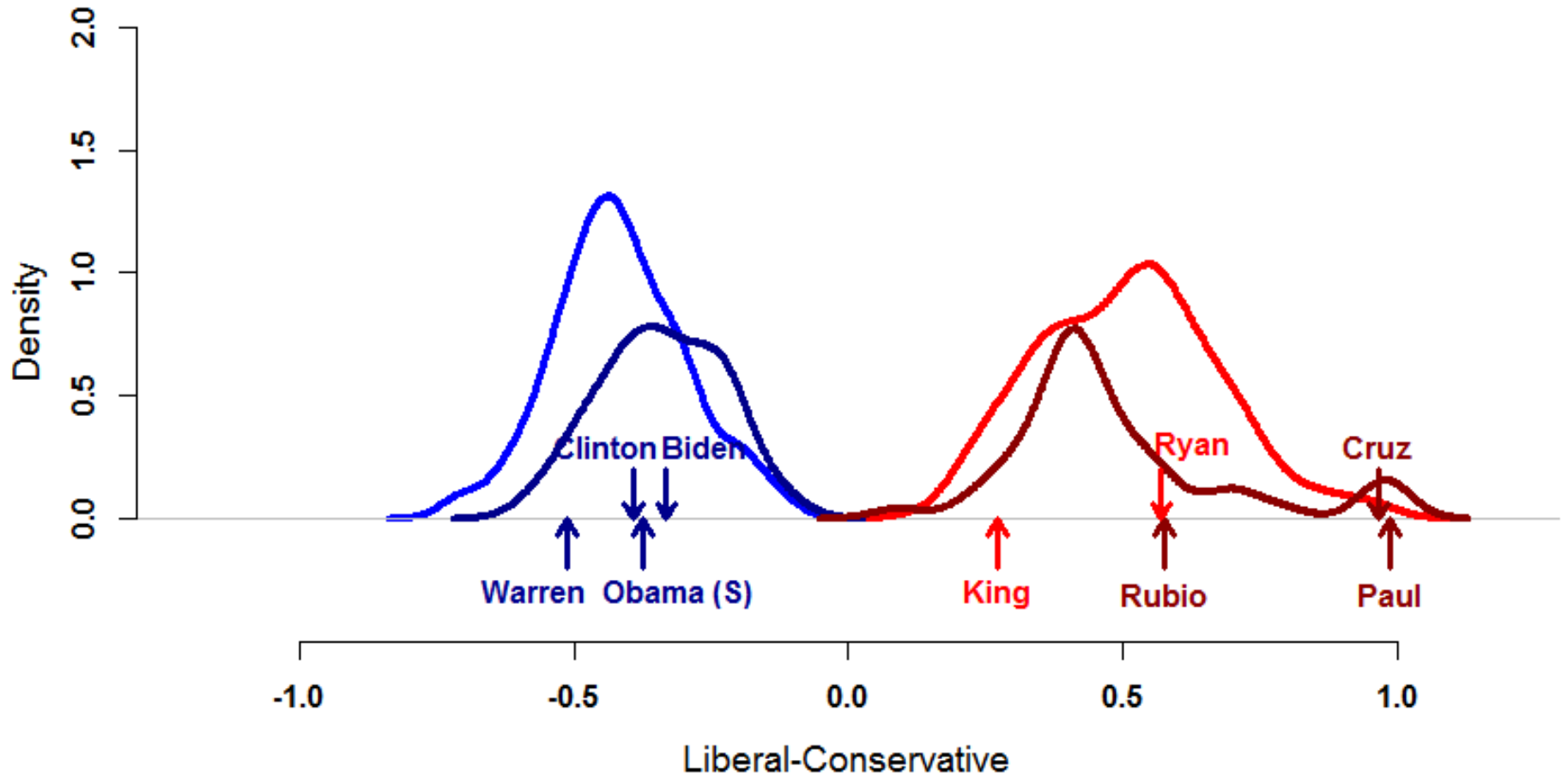
### 102nd (1991-92) Congress



### 112th (2011) Congress

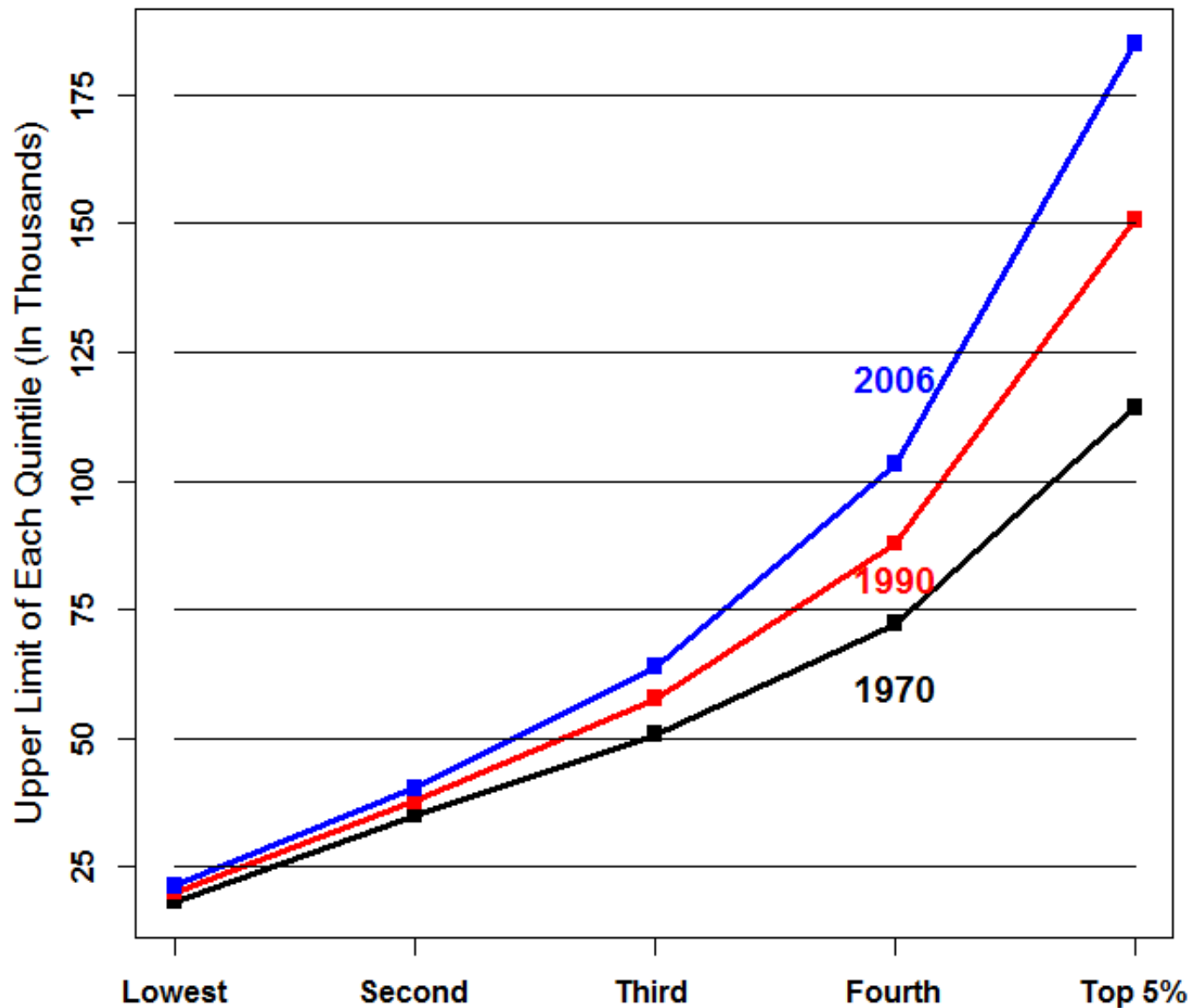


# 113th (2013-2015) Congress Common Space DW-NOMINATE Scores

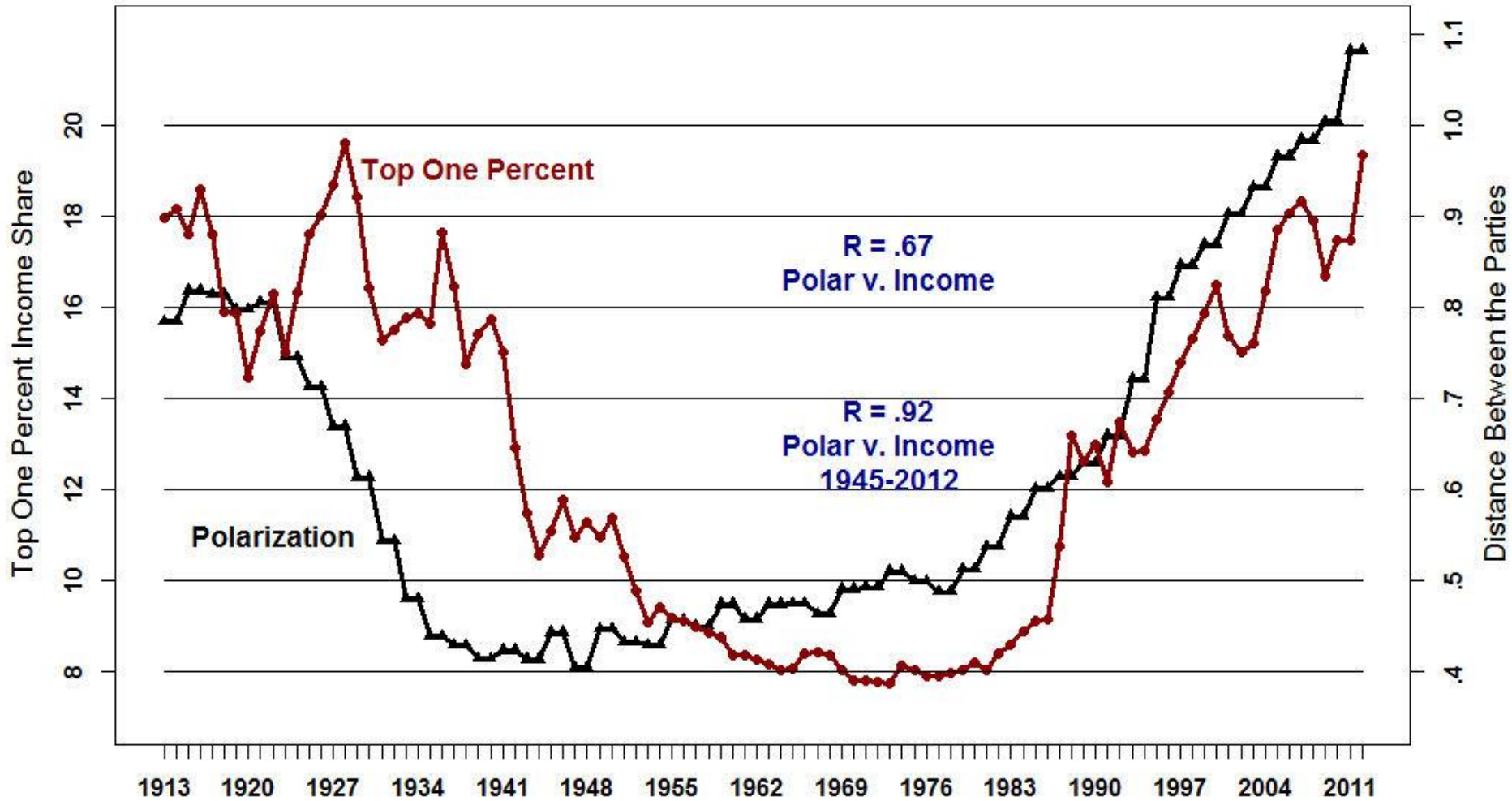




**Income Quintiles 1970-2006**  
**(2009 Dollars)**



**Top 1 Percent Income Share and House Polarization  
1913-2012 (Data From Emmanuel Saez)**



# Income Inequality and Political Polarization 1947 - 2012

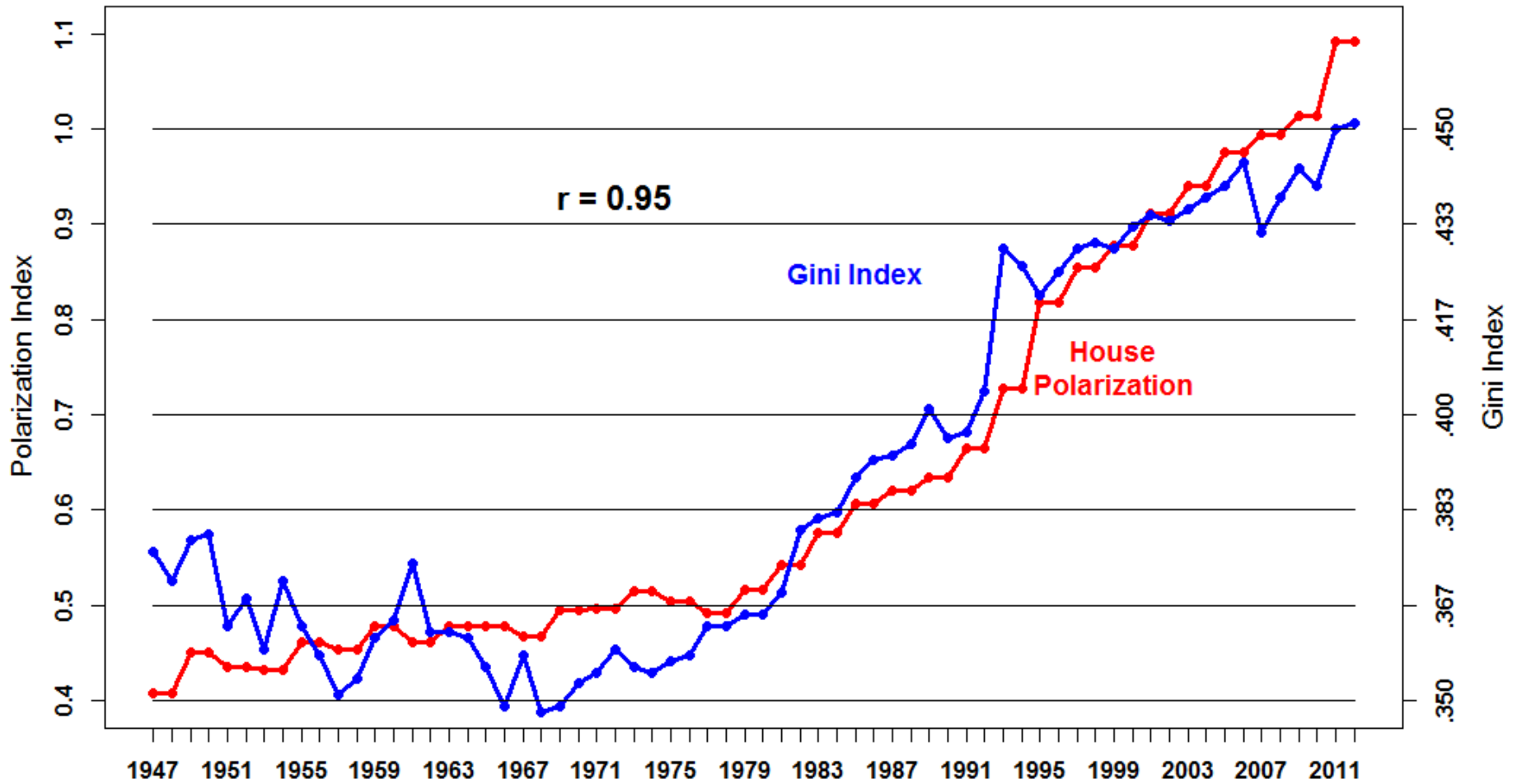
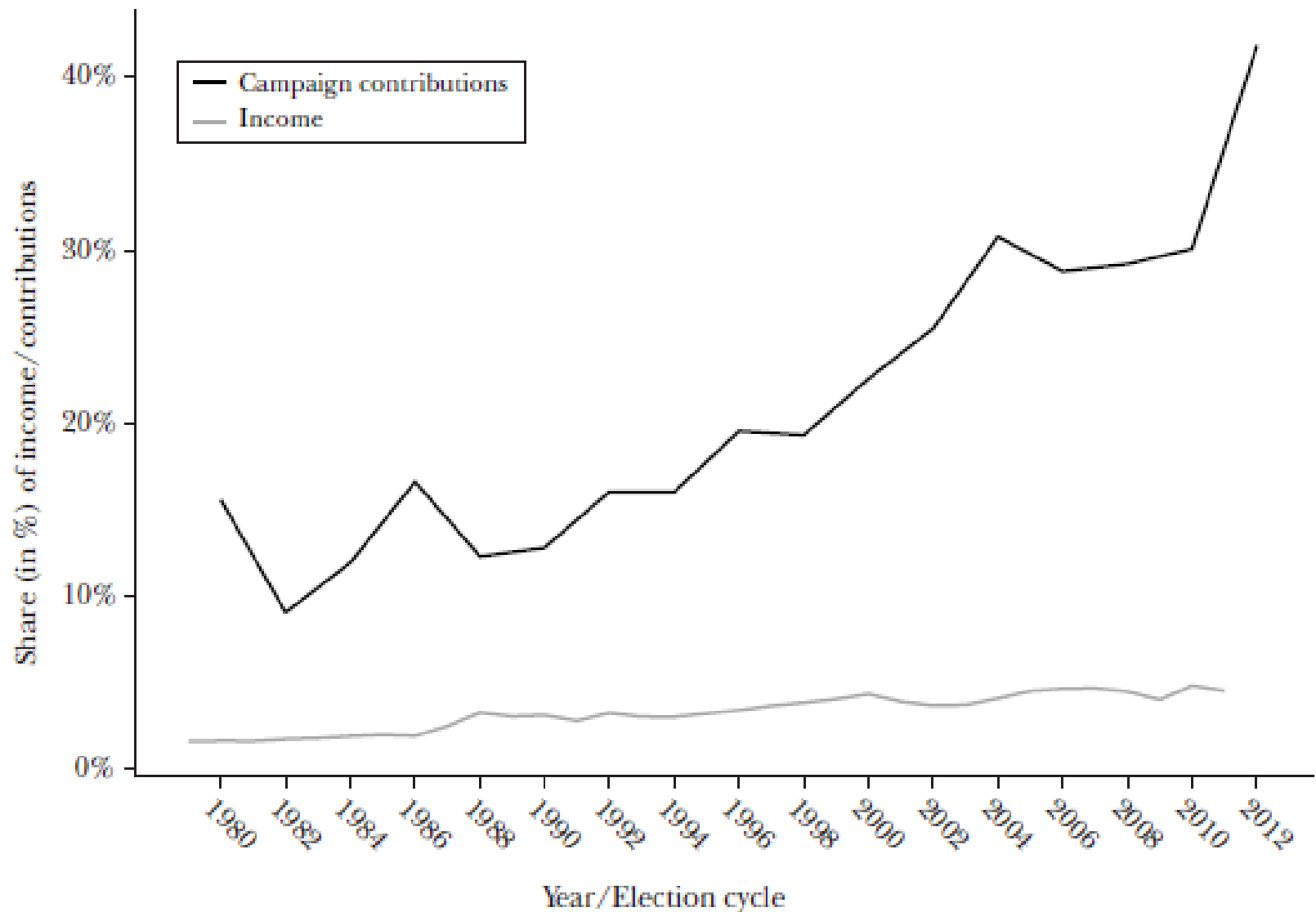


Figure 5

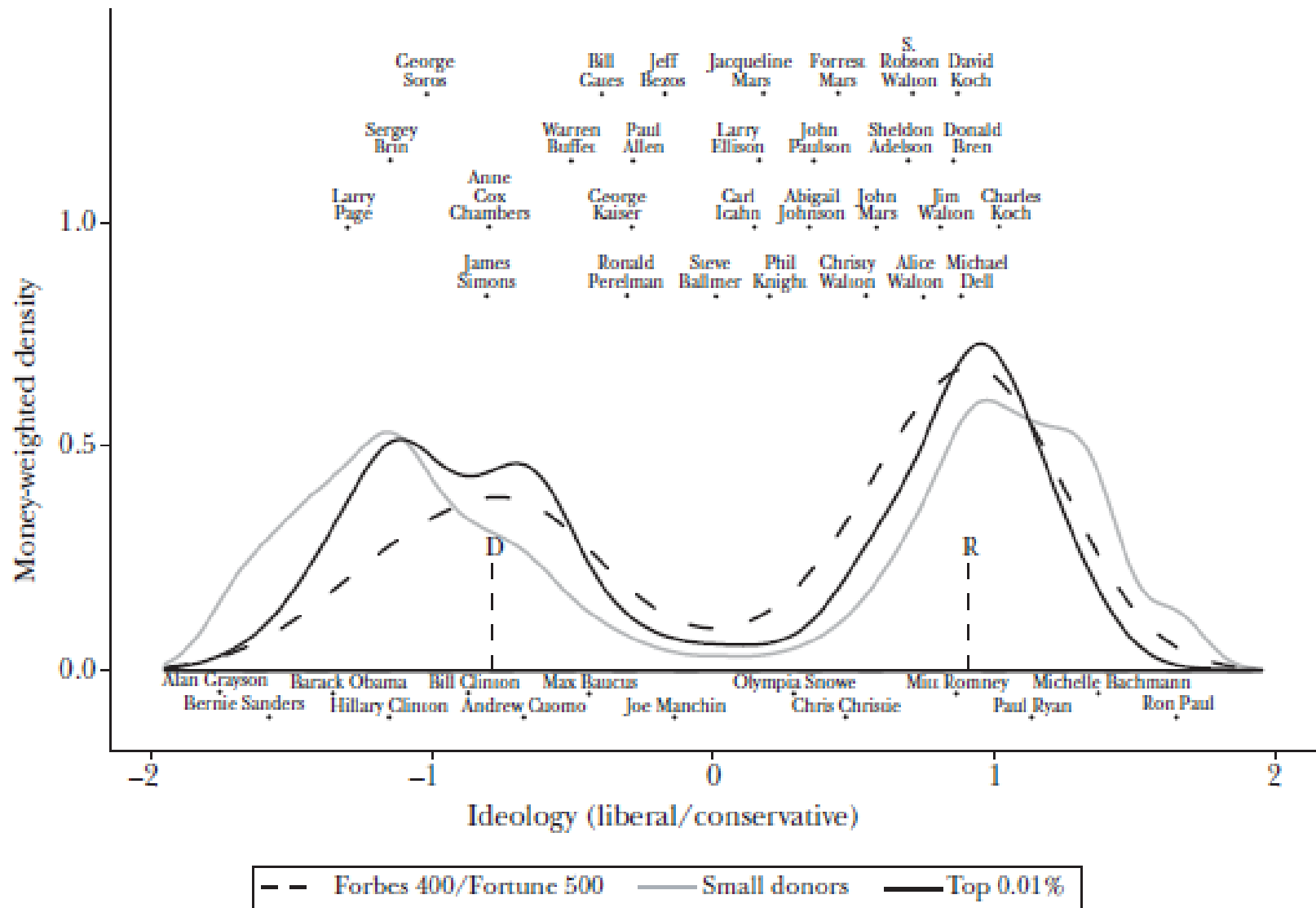
### Concentration of Income and Campaign Contributions in the Top 0.01 Percent of Households and Voting Age Population



Source: For income data, Piketty and Saez (2013).

Figure 7

### The Ideological Distribution of Dollars from Small Donors and the Top 0.01 Percent



Source: Authors calculation's using "CF" scores, as described in Bonica (2013b), as measures of candidate and contributor ideology. Data on political contributions are from the Federal Election Commission.