Political Science 17.20
Introduction to American Politics

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Polarization and Extremism
Lecture 22 (May 2, 2013)
Outline

1. Polarization

2. Government by Polarized Parties
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2. Government by Polarized Parties
Polarization in Congress: 1966 vs. 2008

90th Congress
-1.0 -0.5 0.0 0.5 1.0

111th Congress
-1.0 -0.5 0.0 0.5 1.0

Party
- Democrat
- Republican
1) Realignment of the “Solid South” (1960s–1990s):

Civil and voting rights for Southern blacks

Conservative Southern whites leave Democratic Party

Moderate Southern Democrats in Congress replaced by conservative Republicans
2) Party and Congressional Reforms (1960s–1980s):

Decline of machines, institution of *primaries*, rise of *issue-oriented* “amateur Democrats”

↓

Empowered (Democratic) *majority-party* caucus & leadership, weakened (bipartisan) committee system

↓

**Conditional Party Government**: Homogenous majority party gives leadership more power, which enforces more party unity
3) Republican Reaction and Ascendancy (1980s–2010s):

Combative conservative Newt Gingrich replaces deal-making moderate George Michel as Republican House leader
↓
Rise of routine minority obstructionism and automatic filibuster
↓
After 40 years in minority, Republicans capture Congress in 1994 and institute further party-strengthening reforms
↓
Party-aligned interest groups (e.g., Club for Growth, Tea Party) target “Republicans in Name Only” (RINOs) in primaries
Mass Sorting

- **Jacobson**: Elites polarized first, then citizens followed.
- **Fiorina**: No, citizens have sorted themselves ideologically but remain much more moderate than elites.
  - “Leapfrog representation”
  - Preference for divided government

- But are voters moderate, or do they just... 
  - Not care → answer randomly
  - Lack information → answer ignorantly
  - Lack constraint → inconsistent across issues
  - Misapply ideological labels → “conflicted conservatives”

- This is an active scholarly debate—we will revisit it later.
Outline

1. Polarization

2. Government by Polarized Parties
For an advocate of responsible party government, partisan polarization may look pretty good:

- Party platforms offer clear policy choices to voters
- Disciplined, unified parties
- Incentives for individuals to act collectively
Irresponsible Party Government

- The problem is that we have parliamentary-style polarized parties in a separation-of-powers constitutional system
  - Divided government
  - Supermajority requirements
- Although both parties act collectively, neither is fully responsible for policy outcomes.
- Few benefits to compromise, especially if not from president’s party, but potential large costs (primary challenge) → gridlock
- As a result, we have irresponsible party government.
Which Party Is to Blame?

- **Short Answer:** Both parties are to blame.

- **Longer Answer:** Although both parties have become more ideologically unified and obstructionist, polarization has been asymmetric. Congressional Democrats remain more ideologically diverse than Republicans, and there is no real equivalent to the Tea Party or birthers on the Democratic side.
Making cardinal comparisons across time or context is very dicey—requires assumptions about reference points and what is held fixed when “bridging.”

What assumptions do each of these comparisons make?

- “Elites are more polarized than citizens.”
- “The media has a liberal bias.”
- “Republicans have become more conservative.”