

An Analysis of The Mind of the American Voter:  
Polarization matters, but to Whom?

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## Introduction

### Polarization in Congress

The political debacle plaguing the American government today is the issue of polarization within its major political parties. Polarization is most prevalent in Congress, where Democrats and Republicans quarrel on a daily basis over legislation. Polarization is broken down into two dimensions. The first dimension of polarization is the division of major political parties on fundamental economic and social issues. The second dimension has become defunct; it is the division of the major political parties between 1829-1851 on the issue of race and civil rights (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007). Abraham Lincoln once famously said, "A House divided against itself cannot stand." Although Lincoln clearly was not referring to the political polarization that exists in Congress today his words are certainly applicable. The gridlock politics in America has prevented the President and Congressional majorities from achieving their legislative goals. There is a common misconception that the only way for the American people to express their dissatisfaction is to vote against the party in power. Many people do not consider that the Congressional process works to the advantage of policy minorities (Fiorina, 2008). In Congress today it is much easier to filibuster a bill than to pass one. Filibustering is

so common now that the sixty vote threshold for cloture is the de facto requirement to pass most major legislation and threats to filibuster permeate the day-to-day operation of Congress (Koger, 2010).

The increased polarization in Congress did not occur overnight. Over the past forty years of American politics, political parties have been transformed drastically. In the 1960's and 1970's, during the Johnson, Nixon, and Carter administrations political parties were considered to be in decline. However, in the 1980's and 1990's a shift occurred and political parties have come back into power. Naturally as parties come back into power, polarization rises with this resurgence (Fiorina, 2001). A major contributing factor to polarization is the population of moderates in Congress. In 1968, over half of the members of Congress were considered ideologically moderate. Thirty years later, in 1998 only eighty four members of Congress were considered ideologically moderate (Theriault, 2003). By 2010 there were fewer than twenty moderates in Congress. With fewer moderates, fewer Representatives are inclined to be swing voters on legislation. This results in substantial gridlock and high levels of polarization. Polarization has gotten to the point where in today's Congress it is hard to imagine how it would operate without that significant level of polarization (Baumer, 2005).

One of the major problems with Congress, and more specifically the House is incumbency. In 2002, 83% of House incumbents won at least 60% of the vote. Because of this lack of significant competition, incumbents don't feel the need to appeal as much to moderate voters. They feel that if they stay true to the ideologies of their 'base' then they will be re-elected. This lack of desire to be flexible as a politician is one of the

primary reasons for the increase in polarization (Samuelson, 2003). This problem however seems to exist more so in the House than the Senate. Senators serve six year terms and are elected by the entire state as opposed to one district. This requires Senators to be more moderate as they have to appeal to not only their own base but swing voters as well. Partisanship also tends to be more civil in the Senate. During the impeachment trials of Bill Clinton when partisanship began to show its colors they would often break into informal groups and make compromises to avoid breakdowns like those of the House (Uslaner, 1999). Despite their clear fundamental differences, Democrats and Republicans have shown the ability to unite. After the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, a rise in patriotism also resulted in the passage of major legislation like the Homeland Security Act and the No Child Left Behind Act (Slater, 2005).

## Polarization in the Electorate

With fewer moderates in Congress, fewer voters are considered ideological moderates as well. However, the American people are not nearly as polarized as their representatives. The depiction of the American people as a polarized group is dramatized by mass media outlets and other groups (Fiorina, Abrams, Pope, 2004). It is shown that even on the most controversial of issues, Democrat and Republican voters are not so dissimilar ideologically. Abortion is considered one of the most fundamental and controversial differences between Democrats and Republicans. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope in their 2004 book Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America attack

these misconceptions through polling and surveying. In a survey issued by the National Election Study, voters were polled in a six question survey to determine their stance on abortion. An example of one scenario is, if a women were raped and impregnated is it right to abort the baby? The survey featured five more similar scenarios, and to everyone's surprise on average Democratic voters thought that Abortion was right in 4 out of the 6 scenarios and Republicans 3.5. This .5 differential between the two starkly "polarized" parties shows us that you must through the media distortion and look at hard evidence.

Very few Americans experience national politics firsthand. Most learn about the national government through mass media. In addition, Americans often get their political information from a singular media outlet. This often provides viewers with an objective or even biased political opinion (Fiorina, Peterson, Johnson, Mayer, 2008). This objective opinion in the media is typically liberal. Numerous studies report that journalists are more Democratic than the population at large. A 2007 survey of the national press corps found that only 8 percent identified themselves as "conservative," while 36 percent of the electorate at large did so (Pew Research Center, 2008). Other studies go even farther stating that journalists are more liberal than even college-educated professionals, especially on social issues such as abortion, crime, and gay rights (Schneider and Lewis, 1985). Another, less serious example of this is that another study found that George W. Bush was the butt of about 20 percent more late-night jokes than John Kerry during the 2004 Presidential election (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2004). A great example of media distortion is the depiction of election maps. When broadcast on television, election results are shown through a state by state

representation. This causes states to appear as being won unanimously by one party. However, if you were to look at a county by county representation of the election you would soon realize that America is not as polarized as it appears. Even in the most Democratic of states like New York or in the most Republican states like Texas, there are districts being won by the opposing party (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2004).

Although the American electorate in general is not polarized, voters considered politically savvy have the potential to polarize. A common theory is that as the ideologies of Congressmen move, so will that of its voters (Lachat, 2004). In addition, as a result of a loss of moderates in Congress voters will be moving to the extreme ends of the political spectrum as opposed to the center (Fiorina, 1999).

The problem with today's voters is that they make up their minds before candidates even debate their policies and programs. An American Election Study survey showed that one-half to two-thirds of the electorate decides how to vote before the fall campaign. The figure was 54 percent in 2000, when no incumbent ran, and 79 percent in 2004, when Bush sought reelection (ANES, 2005). The problem begins with party identification. Approximately two-thirds of the American electorate is aligned with either the Democratic or Republican parties. Party ID is thought to be like a religious affiliation: learned in childhood, resistant to change, and unrelated to group's actual doctrines (Rosenthal and Sal, 1973). Party identification is what ensures continuity from election to election and is also why most elections are predictable. Certain groups historically vote Democrat, while others steadily vote Republican. African Americans, urbanites, and Catholics have traditionally been Democratic groups. On the other hand,

wealthy, rural residents, southerners, and white protestant evangelicals have typically voted Republican.

This leaves the swing vote electorate to become retrospective voters. Retrospective voters are voters who make their voting decision based upon previous performance as opposed to party identification. When government is succeeding, retrospective voters typically adopt the “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it” mantra. But in bad times they typically give precedence to the idea of allowing someone else the opportunity to fix government. Retrospective voting is typically based around factors like the state of the economy, or unpopular wars. The question is, do retrospective voters take party polarization into consideration? Or is party polarization an issue that flies under the radar?

## Purpose of this Research

The polarization in America is obvious; however, the same polarization does not exist in the electorate. The question becomes, do the American people recognize polarization as a major issue? And do American voters take polarization into consideration on Election Day?

Polarization is an issue that typically takes a backseat to the economy and military involvement. However, Americans need to realize that polarization in Congress may cause repercussions in fields such as the economy. For example, the American Jobs Act, created by President Obama, would produce 1.9 million jobs and save \$467 billion dollars over the course of ten years. However, the American Jobs Act was blocked by a strong Republican coalition determined to prevent the bill from becoming

law. Many pundits have said that the rejection of the American Jobs Act was built more on the fear that President Obama would succeed so close to the 2012 Presidential election. This is a clear example of how party politics can impact the economy and the everyday lives of Americans.

This research intends to prove that Americans are not taking levels of polarization into account, and are not considering polarization on Election Day. Polarization is a problem in America; it impacts not only legislation, but the daily lives of all Americans. Until the polarization issue is solved the state of gridlock in American politics will continue to go on, and America will not progress as a nation.

## Methodology

### DW-NOMINATE System

In order to determine if polarization is considered by the American people, this research first needed to establish an adequate way to quantify levels of polarization in Congress. Political Scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal developed the DW-NOMINATE system to determine levels of polarization in the House and Senate. NOMINATE analyzes voting behavior for Congressmen, tracking all roll call votes from a calendar year, and then compares them ideologically to determine how unified members of a particular party are. In addition to this, NOMINATE then shows how far apart the parties are from each other on the political spectrum. The NOMINATE scores are based on the Congressmen's ideologies in relation to the first dimension of polarization. The first dimension of polarization is the division of the major political

parties on fundamental economic issues. The second dimension which is not used in NOMINATE scores was most prevalent from 1829-1851 and was based on the party divisions of race and civil rights. The NOMINATE scores not only shows levels of polarization but also determine how many members of the House of Representatives and the Senate are ideological moderates. There is an obvious rise in polarization coinciding with a decline in moderate congressmen.

### Public Opinion

The opinion of the American people can be tracked through two mediums. These mediums are Presidential Approval rating polls and the Congressional Approval rating polls. In order to see if polarization in Congress had any impact on public opinion, this research performed a cross analysis for each, first for Congressional Approval, and second for Presidential Approval, to determine if a correlation exists between the NOMINATE scores and public opinion.

### Election Results

In addition to determining if there is any correlation between levels of polarization and public opinion, this research wants to establish if any correlation exists between the NOMINATE scores and election results. If no significant correlation exists, it will become apparent that polarization may have little or no bearing on the decision making of the American people and that they are truly overlooking the significance of polarization on the American political landscape and the daily lives of the American people.

## Time Period

This research will focus on the time period of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress (1992) to the end of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress (2010). In other terms this research will analyze the period of time from the beginning of the Bill Clinton administration through the first two years of the Barack Obama administration. The purpose for selecting this time period is that a lot of significant events occur during the eighteen year time period. For example, the United States experiences its first government shutdown, President Bill Clinton is impeached, the United States is attacked on 9/11/2001, war is declared in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the economy takes a turn for the worst in 2008.

## Results

This study found no correlation between Congressional approval ratings and levels of polarization in the Senate or House. Although it does appear that Congress' approval rating is decreasing as polarization increases there are some inconsistencies. The 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress reached a similarly low level to the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, about 24%, despite only experiencing polarization levels of .69 in the Senate and .73 in the House. Also the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress achieved the highest approval rating of any Congress from the 103<sup>rd</sup> to the 111<sup>th</sup>, receiving a rating of 55.2% approval. However, at this juncture polarization had reached .78 in the Senate and .90 in the House, much higher ratings than the 103<sup>rd</sup> or 104<sup>th</sup> which had ratings of 24.9% and 33.8% respectively. An interesting note is that Congress' approval rating was at its highest and polarization remained relatively low during the period when Republicans dominated Congress. With the most polarized times occurring during Democratic congresses, it is safe to say that

when in the minority Republicans have a tendency to operate as obstructionists as opposed to Democrats who typically make more concessions and compromises.

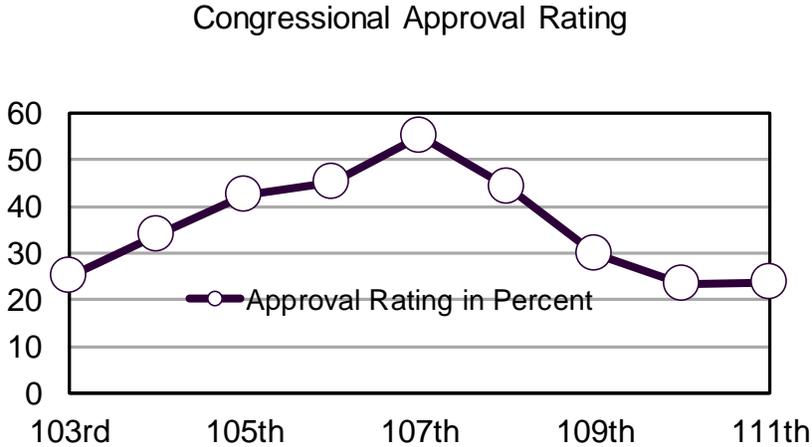
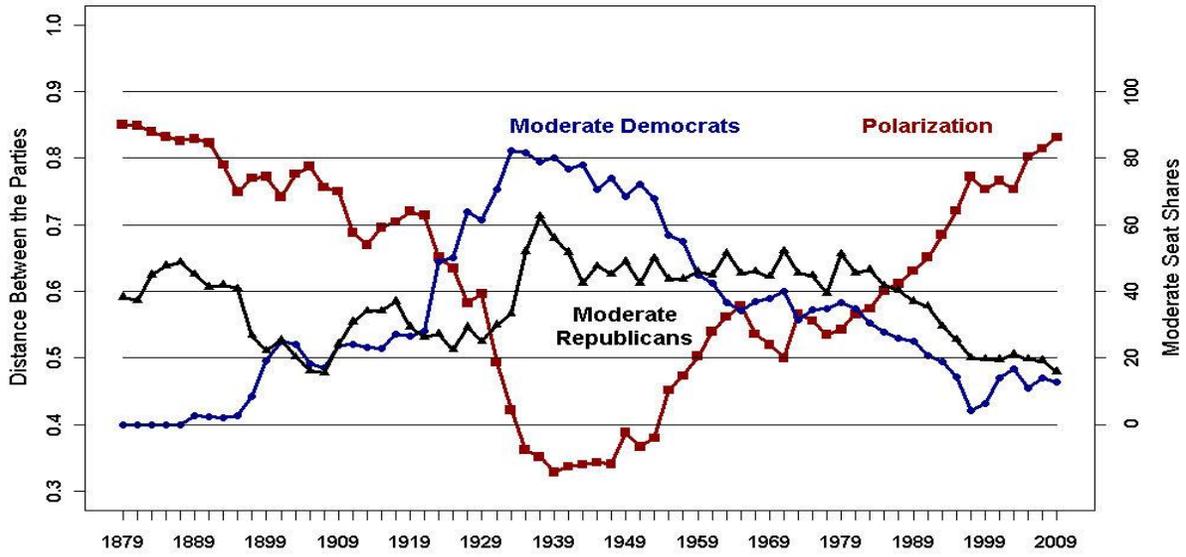


Figure 1.1

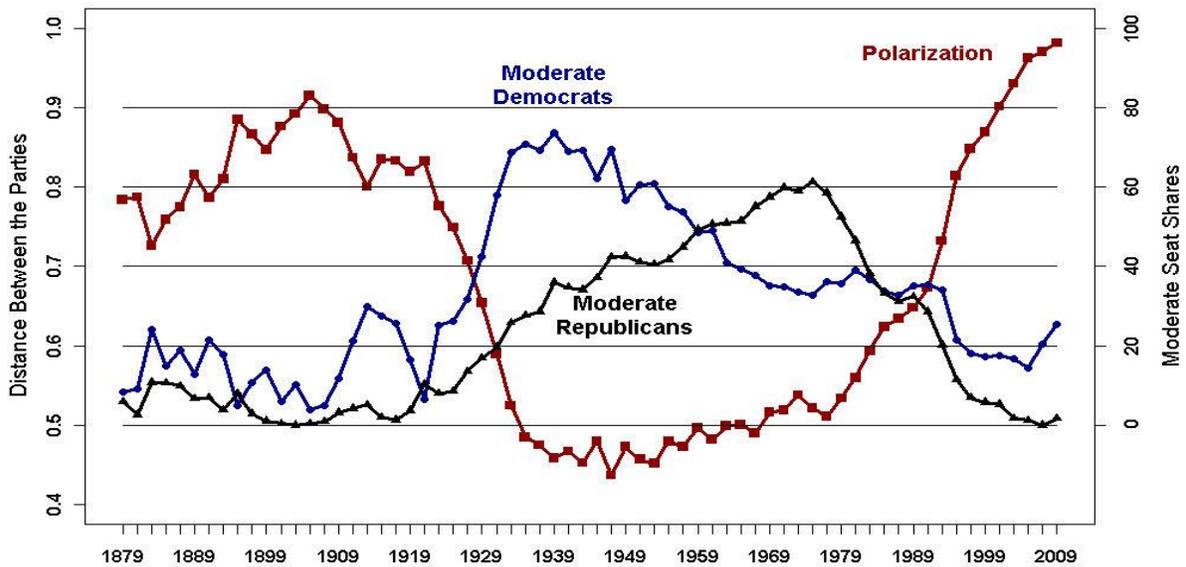
**Senate: Party Polarization 1879-2010**  
**Distance Between the Parties First Dimension**



Poole and Rosenthal, 2010

Figure 1.2

**House: Party Polarization 1879-2010**  
**Distance Between the Parties First Dimension**



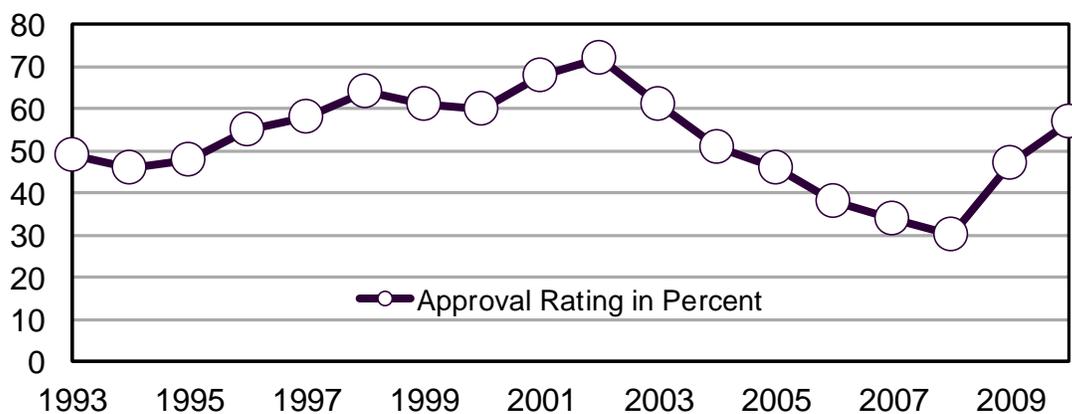
Poole and Rosenthal, 2010

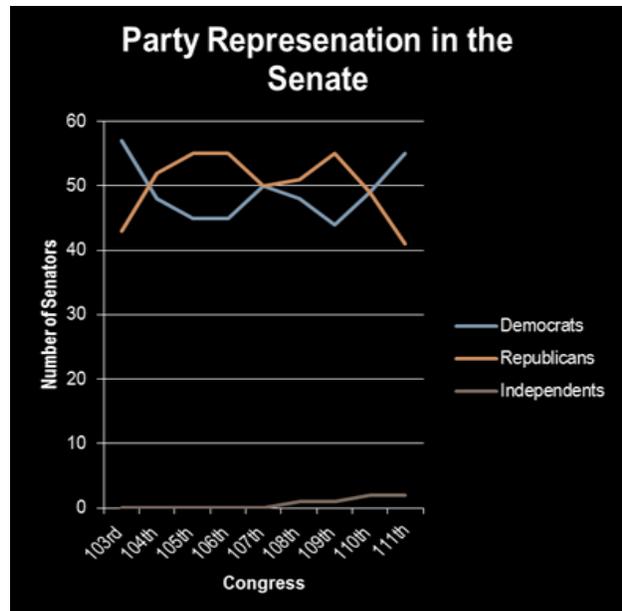
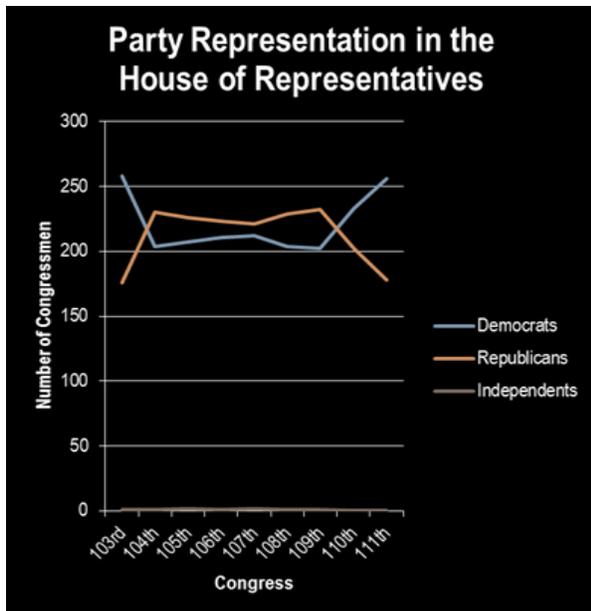
Figure 1.3

This research found no significant correlation between the President's average annual approval rating and levels of polarization in the Senate or House. Some aspects of this cross analysis to allude to a connection, for example, President Bush's approval rating does decline in conjunction with an increase in polarization. However, in 2010 when polarization levels hit an all-time high reaching polarization levels of almost 1.0 (See Figure 1.3) in the House and .8 in the Senate (See Figure 1.2) President Obama experienced a growth in approval from his first to his second year in office. Additionally, Bill Clinton's approval rose gradually for most of his administration (with the exception of his last two years in office, although he did maintain impressive approval ratings of over sixty percent) despite polarization rising at a consistent pace. In fact, polarization levels were below .7 in the Senate and .8 in the house during Clinton's worst year statistically. The positive aspect of this result is that it shows the American people don't believe that gridlock politics is the President's fault and don't penalize the President for an inability to accomplish in terms of legislation.

Lastly, this study wanted to observe if during times of high polarization the American people vote against the majority party or against the minority party to create a super majority. If there was a correlation showing that the American people voted against the majority party it would prove that the American people do not understand that Congress works to the benefit of Congressional minorities. This research hypothesized that there would be no correlation between election results and polarization showing that polarization was not an important issue to the American voter. In the House of Representatives there was no correlation between levels of polarization and election results. For example, in the 110th Congress polarization achieved a rating of .95 (See Figure 1.3), however Democrats won additional seats in the House as opposed to losing or experiencing no change in their number of seats. Similarly this research determined that Senate majorities were unaffected by levels of polarization during their tenure.

Presidential Approval Rating by Year





## Discussion

Through cross analysis of measures of public opinion such as Congressional approval rating, Presidential approval rating, and election results this study proved that polarization is flying under the radar of the American voter. Polarization is an issue that does not resonate in the mind of the American voter, despite its detrimental effect to the government. It is obvious that polarization is an issue that takes a backseat to more publicized issues like the economy or military endeavors. For example, President Bush's approval rating decreased steadily over the course of his administration, not as a result of rising polarization, but over growing disapproval of the War on Terror.

Figure 3.1

The American voter is ignoring the fact that the legislative is the most

Figure 3.2

branch of government. If the legislative branch is in a state of gridlock and nothing is

getting done in Washington, America cannot progress as a nation. Polarization is a growing issue in America; it is not something that will go away overnight. America has gradually become polarized over the last forty years.

The problem starts with party identification and incumbency. Voters are being closed minded in terms of other candidate options and it results in less moderates being elected and more professional politicians being reelected. Now polarization is reaching all-time highs, the debt ceiling crisis during the summer of 2011 is a direct example of Congressmen failing to compromise. The only way to end polarization in Congress is to elect moderate Congressmen. As is shown in Figure 1.2 and Figure 1.3 from 1930 to 1970 polarization was considerably low. This is in conjunction with more than half of Congress being moderate ideologically. Moderate congressmen align with one party, however, they vote on legislation based on its benefit for America as opposed to its impact on the party politics. Legislation is failing to pass through Congress, the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress has ninety one filibusters and the 110<sup>th</sup> had a Congressional record one hundred and twelve. America today is in a state of gridlock and it is causing government to be stagnant. America is being surpassed by other countries in terms of the economy and production and without successful legislation there is no possibility of upward progression for the United States. The only way for American voters to change the American political landscape is to end polarization by bringing moderates back to Congress.

Future research should focus on extending this research to a bigger historical timeframe. This study was limited by time constraints and hopes to give more depth to its finding in the future. The results are limited in their scope, however their result is

powerful. The American people need to realize that polarization is an issue that must be addressed on Election Day.

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