



By Robert N. Stavins

## Polarized Politics Paralyze Policy

There is a widening gulf between the two political parties that is paralyzing sensible policy action in Washington. This increasing polarization — the disappearance of moderates — has been taking place for four decades. The rise of the Tea Party movement is only the most recent vehicle that has continued a 40-year trend.

Why has party polarization increased so dramatically in the Congress over the past four decades? Three structural factors stand out.

First, there is the increasing importance of the primary system, a consequence of the “democratization” of the nomination process that took flight in the 1970s. A small share of the electorate vote in primaries, namely those with the strongest political preferences — the most conservative Republicans and the most liberal Democrats. This self-selection greatly favors candidates from the extremes.

Second, decades of redistricting — a state prerogative guaranteed by the Constitution — has produced more and more districts that are dominated by either Republican or Democratic voters. This increases the importance of primary elections, which is where the key choices among candidates are now made in many congressional districts. Because of this, polarization has proceeded at a much more rapid pace in the House than the Senate.

Third, the increasing cost of electoral

campaigns greatly favors incumbents (with the ratio of average incumbent-to-challenger financing now exceeding 10-to-1). This tends to make districts relatively safe for the party that controls the seat, thereby increasing the importance of primaries.

These three factors operate mainly through the replacement of members of Congress, whether due to death, retirement, or challenges from within the party — that is, the ideological shifts that cause increasing polarization largely occur when new members are elected from either party, although a disproportionate share of polarization has been due to the rightward shift of new Republicans.

To a lesser degree, polarization has also taken place through the adaptation of sitting members of Congress as they behave more ideologically once in office. Such political conversions are due to the same pressures noted above: in order to discourage or survive primary challenges, Republican members shift rightward and Democratic members shift leftward. Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) evolved from being a moderate at the time of his 2008 presidential run to being a solid conservative in 2010, in response to a primary challenge from a Tea Party candidate.

If the increasing polarization of the Congress is due to these factors, then it is difficult to be optimistic about the prognosis in the near term for American politics, because it is unlikely that any of these factors will soon reverse course.

The two parties are not about to abandon the primary system to return to smoke filled back rooms. Likewise, state legislatures are not willing to abandon their power to redistrict (although California’s experiment with an independent citizens commission may provide hope). And public financing of campaigns and other measures that would reduce the advantages of incumbency remain generally unpopular (among incumbents, who

would, after all, need to vote for such reforms).

Of course, in addition to these long-term structural factors, shorter-term economic and social fluctuations also have pronounced effects. In particular, significant economic downturns — whether the Great Depression of the 1930s or the Great Recession of the past several years — increase political polarization.

The 1930s saw not only the rise of American socialists and communists, but also the rise of American right-wing extremism. It took World War II to bring an end both to the economic upheaval of the 1930s and the destructive political polarization that had accompanied it.

U.S. participation in the war brought a degree of political unity at home, largely because U.S. action was precipitated by the attack on Pearl Harbor. Under conditions of less clear motivation for U.S. military action abroad — such as in the war in Vietnam — the result has not been political unity, but divisiveness and polarization. The ultimate impacts on domestic politics of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq may hinge on whether they are perceived to be patriotic responses to a foreign attack (9/11) or manifestations of U.S. military adventurism.

So, it’s reasonable to anticipate — or at least hope — that better economic times will reduce the pace of ongoing political polarization. But in the face of the three long-term structural factors I’ve identified — increasing importance of primaries, continuing redistricting, and increasing costs of electoral campaigns — it is difficult to be optimistic about the long-term prognosis for American politics. I hope I’m wrong.

**Robert N. Stavins** is the Albert Pratt Professor of Business and Government at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and Director of the Harvard Environmental Economics Program. He can be reached at [robert\\_stavins@harvard.edu](mailto:robert_stavins@harvard.edu).

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