U.S. Senate Elections in a Polarized Era

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, partisan polarization has increased dramatically in the electorate as well as in Congress and this development has had important consequences for Senate elections. The electoral coalitions supporting Democratic and Republican Senate candidates have become increasingly distinct in terms of race and ideology which has led to increased party loyalty and straight ticket voting. Senate elections have also become increasingly nationalized with voters basing their decisions on their evaluation of the president’s performance. The proportion of states that tilt strongly toward one party has increased substantially with the South becoming a strongly Republican region and the Northeast becoming a strongly Democratic region. There are fewer competitive Senate races but the relatively close balance of power between the parties in the nation and the strong influence of national issues on voters have contributed to larger seat swings and more frequent turnover in party control of the Senate. The current 60-seat Democratic majority is the largest for either party since the 1970s. The results of the 2010 and 2012 elections will indicate whether this development signals the emergence of a stable Democratic majority or whether it is a short-term phenomenon based on voter disillusionment with the Bush Administration.

The rise of ideological polarization in the U.S. Congress over the past several decades has been well documented by scholars (Rohde 1991; Poole and Rosenthal 1991; Bond and Fleisher 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2004; Poole 2005; Smith and Gamm 2005; Sinclair 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 2007). In both the Senate and the House of Representatives, the ideological divide between the parties has widened dramatically: the Democratic Party has moved steadily to the left since the 1970s while the Republican Party has moved steadily to the right. Conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, who exercised considerable influence in Congress from the end of World War II through the 1970s, have almost completely disappeared. And the rise of polarization cannot be attributed to partisan gerrymandering, as some scholars and journalists have claimed (Broder 2004; Ornstein and McMillion 2005; Eilperin 2006), since the increase in polarization has been just as great in the Senate as in the House of Representatives (Ono 2005; Poole 2005).

[Figure 1 goes here]

In recent years, even moderates have become relatively rare in the Senate, as the evidence in Figure 1 demonstrates. This figure displays the locations of senators in the 111th Congress on a liberal-conservative scale based on DW-NOMINATE scores from the 110th Congress and predicted locations of new members on the same scale.\footnote{For clarity of presentation, I multiplied DW-NOMINATE scores by 10 and rounded them off to the nearest whole integer. I predicted the locations of new members based on the scores of senators from the same party and state or, when that was not possible, from the same party and a neighboring state. For example, I predicted that Al Franken’s (D-MN) score would be identical to that of Amy Klobuchar (D-MN).} Figure 1 shows very clearly the ideological chasm separating the parties in the current Senate. In marked contrast to the situation that existed 30 or 40 years ago, there is no overlap at all between the two parties. The most conservative Democrat, Ben Nelson of Nebraska, is located to the left of the most liberal Republican, Olympia Snowe of Maine.
The evidence displayed in Table 1 shows that the ideological polarization that characterizes the 111th Senate represents a dramatic change from the situation that existed 40 years ago. In the 91st Senate (1969-71), moderates made up 41 percent of the members while strong liberals and conservatives made up only 22 percent. In contrast, in today’s Senate, moderates make up only 5 percent of the members while strong liberals and conservatives make up 49 percent.

Although both parties have contributed to increased polarization, the movement away from the center has been greater on the Republican side than on the Democratic side. Between the 91st Senate and the 111th Senate, the proportion of Democratic senators classified as moderates fell from 36 percent to 5 percent while the proportion classified as strong liberals rose from 22 percent to 43 percent. Over the same time period, the proportion of Republican senators classified as moderates fell from 48 percent to 5 percent while the proportion classified as strong conservatives rose from 21 percent to 55 percent.

[Table 1 goes here]

The rise of ideological polarization has had important consequences for the legislative process in both chambers of Congress, making bipartisan cooperation increasingly difficult and strengthening the hand of party leaders (Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Smith and Gamm 2005). But the consequences of polarization have been greater in some ways for the Senate than for the House because the House has traditionally operated in a much more partisan fashion than the Senate. In the House of Representatives, the rules governing debate and floor voting have long given crucial advantages to the leaders of the majority party. And increasing polarization may make it easier for leaders of the majority party to keep their own members unified on the floor.

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2 Senators with NOMINATE scores below -.5 were classified as strong conservatives, those with scores between -.5 and -.2 were classified as conservatives, those with scores between -.2 and +.2 were classified as moderates, those with scores between .2 and .5 were classified as liberals, and those with scores of .5 or higher were classified as strong liberals.
since there are now fewer ideological outliers to persuade (Schickler and Pearson 2005). In the Senate, however, reliance on unanimous consent agreements and the filibuster rule have provided the minority party with much greater influence (Evans and Lipinski 2005). For most purposes it takes 60 votes to pass legislation and this usually requires both near unanimity within the majority party and at least a few votes from members of the minority party. As we have seen in the first few months of the 111th Congress, this has become a very difficult task requiring delicate negotiations between the majority party leadership and a handful of moderates in both parties who hold the balance of power.

Polarization in the Electorate

While scholars generally agree about the importance of increasing partisan polarization in Congress, there has been much less agreement on the extent and significance of polarization in the American electorate. The central argument of this paper is that polarization is not just an elite phenomenon. I will present evidence that over the past several decades there has been a substantial increase in polarization in the electorate and that this has had important consequences for Senate elections and for the relationship between senators and their constituents.

Four major trends have affected Senate elections in the past thirty years as a direct result of growing partisan polarization within the electorate. First, the parties’ electoral coalitions have become increasingly distinct both racially and ideologically. The nonwhite share of the U.S. electorate has doubled since the early 1990s, reaching a record 26 percent in 2008, and this trend is almost certain to continue based on the racial make-up of the youngest and oldest age groups in the population. However, due to the overwhelming preference of nonwhite voters for the Democratic Party, the growth of the nonwhite electorate has led to an increasing racial divide between the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions. At the same time, the parties’
electoral coalitions have become increasingly distinct ideologically as a result of a gradual ideological realignment within the electorate (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998). Democratic Senate voters have become increasingly liberal while Republican Senate voters have become increasingly conservative.

Second, as a result of the growing racial and ideological differences between the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions, party loyalty and straight ticket voting have increased in Senate elections. This increase in party loyalty at the individual level means that state partisanship is now a stronger determinant of the outcomes of Senate elections than in the past and that winning candidates’ electoral coalitions are more party-based than in the past.

Third, as a result of the changing racial composition of the electorate and ideological realignment, geographic polarization has increased. States with relatively liberal electorates have been trending Democratic while states with relatively conservative electorates have been trending Republican. As a result, the South has become the most Republican region in the nation while the Northeast has become the most Democratic region. Although the overall balance of power between the parties in the nation has been relatively close in recent years, the number of states dominated by one party has increased while the number of evenly balanced states has decreased. In the color-coded language of media commentators, there are more dark blue and dark red states and fewer purple states.

The combination of increased geographic polarization and increased party loyalty in voting means that it is now much more difficult for a candidate from the minority party to win a Senate election. Fewer senators represent swing states or states that favor the opposing party while more senators represent states that are relatively safe for their own party. As a result, fewer senators need to worry about appealing to voters who identify with the opposing party.
Finally, Senate elections have become increasingly nationalized. As ideological differences between the two parties have grown, voters have increasingly come to see a Senate election as a choice about not just who will represent their state but which party will control the Senate. Therefore in choosing a Senate candidate, voters are increasingly influenced by their opinions about the national political situation and especially their opinions about the president’s performance. This has resulted in greater consistency in the party direction of seat turnover, larger seat swings and more frequent changes in party control of the Senate.

There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between polarization in the Senate and polarization in the electorate. Polarization in the Senate has contributed to both increased party loyalty and increased influence of national issues in Senate elections. With the near-disappearance of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, almost all Senate contests now involve a clear choice between a liberal Democrat and a conservative Republican. As a result, there is less incentive for voters to cross party lines. At the same time, increasing polarization within the electorate has served to reinforce the divisions between Democrats and Republicans in the Senate. One of the main reasons why Democratic and Republican senators are deeply divided on major issues such as health care is that Democratic and Republican voters are deeply divided on these issues. Rather than indicating that there is a “disconnect” between politicians and voters (Fiorina 2006; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006), polarization in Congress actually indicates that Democratic and Republican members are accurately reflecting the views of the voters who elected them.

Diverging Party Coalitions

The growth of the nonwhite electorate, beginning with African-Americans in the 1960s and 1970s and continuing with Hispanics and Asian-Americans since the 1980s, has had profound
consequences for the party system and the electoral process in the United States. African-American and Hispanic voters now comprise a large proportion of the electoral base of the Democratic Party. This trend played a major role in the election of the nation’s first African-American president, Barack Obama. According to the 2008 national exit poll, African-Americans made up 24 percent of Obama voters while Hispanics and other nonwhites made up 16 percent of Obama voters. In contrast, despite the rapid growth in the proportion of nonwhite voters over the past two decades, the Republican Party’s electoral base has changed very little and remains overwhelmingly white. According to the 2008 national exit poll, African-Americans made up less than one percent of McCain voters while Hispanics and other nonwhites made up only 9 percent of McCain voters.

The same demographic trends that contributed to Barack Obama’s victory have had a powerful impact on U.S. Senate elections. Figure 2 displays the trends in the nonwhite proportions of Democratic and Republican senate voters between the 1950s and the first decade of the 21st century. During this time period, even as the nonwhite share of the electorate has increased, the Republican Party’s strategy has continued to emphasize appealing to conservative white voters. This strategy has been successful: Republican identification among conservative white voters has increased dramatically. However, the gap in nonwhite support for the two parties has also increased dramatically. During the 1950s, nonwhites made up about 8 percent of Democratic Senate voters and about 4 percent of Republican Senate voters. By the 2000s, nonwhites made up almost 40 percent of Democratic Senate voters but less than 10 percent of Republican Senate voters.

[Figure 2 goes here]
If the Republican Party does not improve its performance among nonwhite voters, it is likely to face an increasingly challenging electoral environment. Conservative whites have been shrinking as a share of the overall electorate for some time and, at close to 90 percent identification, the GOP may have already maxed out its support among this group. At the same time, the nonwhite share of the U.S. electorate is certain to continue growing well into the 21st century. This can be seen by examining exit poll data on the racial composition of 2008 electorate as well as Census Bureau data on the racial composition of the U.S. population by age. According to the 2008 national exit poll, non-Hispanic whites made up 81 percent of voters over the age of 45 but only 66 percent of voters under the age of 45; African-Americans made up 15 percent of voters under the age of 45 compared with only 9 percent of those 45 and older while Hispanics and other nonwhites made up 19 percent of voters under the age of 45 compared with only 10 percent of those 45 and older.

A 2007 Census Bureau study shows that there is a dramatic difference between the racial composition of the oldest and youngest age groups in the U.S. population. According to the Census Bureau, Non-Hispanic whites make up almost 81 percent of Americans over the age of 65 but less than 60 percent of those under the age of 18. In contrast, African-Americans make up more than 15 percent of the population under the age of 18 compared with only 8 percent of the population over the age of 65 and Hispanics make up more than 20 percent of the population under the age of 18 and almost 24 percent of the population under the age of 5, compared with less than 7 percent of the population over the age of 65. While the nonwhite share of the electorate will probably continue to lag behind the nonwhite share of the population due to lower citizenship and turnout rates, these data indicate that we can expect the nonwhite share of the U.S. electorate to continue to grow for many years.
Along with the racial divide, the ideological divide between supporters of the two major parties has widened considerably since the 1970s. The gradual disappearance of conservative Democrats and moderate-to-liberal Republicans has had a clear impact on the electoral coalitions of Democratic and Republican Senate candidates. Figure 3 displays the trends in the average scores of Democratic and Republican Senate voters over the past four decades on the ANES 7-point liberal-conservative scale. Over this time period, the gap between the average location of Democratic and Republican voters has more than doubled, from .8 units to 1.7 units. In 1972, conservative identifiers made up 30 percent of Democratic Senate voters and 43 percent of Republican Senate voters. In 2008, conservative identifiers made up 19 percent of Democratic Senate voters and 72 percent of Republican Senate voters.

The growing ideological identification gap between Democratic and Republican voters is especially significant because there has also been a substantial increase in the relationship between ideological identification and a wide range of policy preferences. For example, according to ANES data, between 1984 and 2008, the correlation between ideological identification and abortion preference increased from .28 to .47, the correlation between ideological identification and health insurance policy preference increased from .24 to .49, and the correlation between ideological identification and government spending/services preference increased from .32 to .52. As a result, as Democratic and Republican voters have moved apart on the ideological identification scale, they have also moved apart on a wide range of policy issues.

It is also important to note that partisan polarization is greatest among the most politically engaged members of the public—those who care about politics, pay attention to what their
elected representatives are doing, vote regularly, and engage in political activities beyond voting. Thus, according to data from the 2008 ANES, the correlation between ideological identification and Senate vote was .30 for those whose political involvement was limited to voting, .58 for those who engage in one activity beyond voting, and .73 for those who engaged in at least two activities beyond voting.

Among Republican Senate voters, the average score on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale was 4.7 for those whose involvement was limited to voting, 5.2 for those who engaged in one activity beyond voting, and 5.6 for those who engaged in at least two activities beyond voting; among Democratic Senate voters, the average score was 3.8 for those whose involvement was limited to voting, 3.4 for those who engaged in one activity beyond voting, and 2.9 for those who engaged in at least two activities beyond voting. The most politically engaged Republican voters were much more conservative than those who were less politically engaged while the most politically engaged Democratic voters were much more liberal than those who were less politically engaged. And it is the engaged partisans whose preferences are of greatest concern to candidates and elected officials including U.S. senators.

The Decline and Resurgence of Partisanship

Since the 1970s, the growing racial and ideological divisions between supporters of the two parties have contributed to a marked increase in partisan voting in Senate elections. Far fewer voters feel cross-pressured by their ideological orientation and their party identification. Therefore, far fewer are tempted to defect to the opposing party. This can be seen in Figure 4 which displays the trends in two measures of partisan voting, party loyalty and straight-ticket voting, between the 1950s and the first decade of the 21st century.

[Figure 4 goes here]
Between the 1950s and the 1970s there were substantial declines in both party loyalty and straight-ticket voting in Senate elections. Based on this trend, political scientists concluded that the U.S. was experiencing a period of partisan “dealignment” during the 1970s. In 1972, partisanship reached its nadir as only 76 percent of Democratic and Republican identifiers (including leaning independents) voted for their own party’s Senate candidate and only 72 percent of voters chose a presidential and Senate candidate from the same party. Since then, however, both of these measures have rebounded to levels not seen since the 1950s. In 2008, 87 percent of Democratic and Republican identifiers voted for their own party’s Senate candidate and 88 percent of voters chose a presidential and Senate candidate from the same party.

The Rise of Geographic Polarization

As the racial and ideological divisions between the parties have deepened, one of the most important consequences for Senate and presidential elections has been growing geographic polarization. Conservative states and regions have been trending toward the Republican Party while more liberal states and regions have been trending toward the Democratic Party. The results of these trends were clearly apparent in 2008. Although there were more blue states and fewer red states, the divide between the two was even deeper than in 2004. Across all 50 states, the average margin of victory for the winning presidential candidate increased from 13.9 points in 2004 to 16.2 points in 2008: the average margin of victory for Barack Obama was 16.8 points while the average margin of victory for John McCain was 15.4 points. There were more landslide and near-landslide states and fewer closely contested states. The number of states in which the winning candidate’s margin of victory was greater than 15 points increased from 21 to 26, while the number in which the winning candidate’s margin of victory was less than 5 points decreased from 11 to 6. Of the seven most populous states, only Florida and Ohio were decided
by less than 5 points while New York, California, and Illinois were decided by more than 20 points.

There was wide divergence in support for the presidential candidates across states and regions of the country. Although Barack Obama made inroads into the Republican Party’s southern base by carrying Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida, John McCain carried the other 8 states of the old Confederacy along with the border states of Kentucky and Oklahoma, winning most of them by double-digit margins. Altogether, McCain won 54 percent of the popular vote in the South while Obama won 57 percent of the popular vote in the rest of the country. The 2008 election was a landslide for Barack Obama outside of the South and a near-landslide for John McCain in the South.

The regional voting patterns in the 2008 presidential election reflected a long-term ideological realignment within the American electorate. This has had a dramatic impact on the regional composition of the Democratic and Republican parties in the Senate. The conservative South has been transformed from a Democratic stronghold into a Republican stronghold. In the 86th Congress (1959-61), Democrats held all 22 Senate seats from the 11 states of the old Confederacy. In the 111th Congress, even after suffering some losses in the 2006 and 2008 elections, Republicans hold 15 of the 22 Senate seats from these states. At the same time that the South was moving toward the GOP, however, the liberal Northeast was moving in the opposite direction. In the 86th Congress, Republicans held 14 of the 22 Senate seats from 11 states in the Northeast: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. In the 111th Congress, Republicans hold only 3 of the 22 seats from these states.
This regional realignment has altered the distribution of power within the two parties in the Senate. Fifty years ago, southern conservatives held many key committee chairmanships and exercised considerable influence within the Democratic Party in the Senate while northeastern liberals made up a large and influential bloc within the Senate Republican Party. Today the strength of the Democratic and Republican parties in the major regions of the country is much more consistent with the ideological orientations of the voters in those regions. As a result, northeastern liberals comprise the largest bloc in the Senate Democratic caucus while southern conservatives comprise by far the largest bloc in the Senate Republican caucus (Black and Black 2007).

[Table 2 goes here]

The high degree of geographic polarization in 2008 is consistent with the pattern evident in other recent presidential elections, including the 2004 election, but it represents a dramatic change from the voting patterns of the 1960s and 1970s as the evidence in Table 2 demonstrates. In the competitive 1960 and 1976 elections, for example, there were far more closely contested states and far fewer landslide states than in recent presidential elections. In 1960, 20 states were decided by less than 5 points and only 9 by more than 15 points; in 1976, 20 states were decided by less than 5 points and only 10 by more than 15 points.

The trends shown in Table 2 along with increasing party loyalty among voters clearly have important implications for Senate elections. As the number of states that strongly favor one party has increased and party loyalty has increased, we would expect to find an increase in the number of senators holding relatively safe seats and a corresponding decline in the number holding marginal or high-risk seats. And this is exactly what has happened according to the data displayed in Table 3.
Table 3 compares the partisan orientations of states represented by Democratic and Republican senators during three time periods—1976-1978, 1992-2000, and 2008. States were classified as safe or solid if they gave at least 55 percent of the vote to the presidential candidate of a senator’s party; they were classified as marginal if they gave between 45 and 55 percent of the vote to the presidential candidate of a senator’s party, and they were classified as high risk if they gave less than 45 percent of the vote to the presidential candidate of a senator’s party. According to these data, there was only a modest increase in the proportion of senators whose states were classified as safe or solid for their party between the 1970s and the 1990s. Between the 1990s and 2008, however, the proportion of senators representing states that were classified as safe or solid for their party increased from 36 percent to 60 percent.

In the 111th Congress, large majorities of Democrats and Republicans in both chambers represent states or districts in which their party is strongly advantaged. This can be seen in Table 4 which compares the partisan orientations of the constituencies represented by members of the House and Senate. Despite the much greater population and economic diversity of the average state compared with the average House district, the data show that senators in the 111th Congress are about as likely as House members to represent constituencies in which their party’s presidential candidate won at least 55 percent of the vote. Only a small minority of senators and House members represent states or districts whose voters clearly favor the opposing party based on the results of the 2008 presidential election.
Competition in Senate Elections

Given the growing number of senators representing states in which their party is strongly advantaged, it is not surprising that there has been a marked decline in competition in Senate elections in recent years. Table 5 displays the trends in the proportions of competitive and one-sided Senate contests by decade since the 1960s. The data in this table show that since 2002, only 22 percent of Senate contests have been decided by a margin of less than 10 percentage points while 55 percent have been decided by a margin of at least 20 percentage points. Those elections had the smallest proportion of competitive contests and the largest proportion of one-sided contests in the past five decades. During the 1960s, 40 percent of Senate contests were decided by a margin of less than 10 percentage points and only 38 percent were decided by a margin of at least 20 percentage points.

[Table 5 goes here]

Despite the decline in competition for individual Senate seats, however, competition for control of the Senate has actually increased in recent years. The data in Table 6 show that despite the decline in the number of competitive races, the average number of Senate seats switching parties has remained fairly stable since the 1960s except for a temporary bump during the 1970s. Meanwhile, the frequency of switches in party control of the Senate has actually increased over time. There were no switches in party control between 1962 and 1970, only one between 1972 and 1980 and between 1982 and 1990, but two between 1992 and 2000 and two more between 2002 and 2008.

[Table 6 goes here]

Part of the explanation for the increasing frequency of switches in party control of the Senate in recent years is a shift in the balance of power between the parties. Between 1962 and
1980, Democrats controlled the large majority of Senate seats. Since 1980, however, the two parties have alternated in power and the balance of power has generally been much closer. The size of the average Senate majority fell from over 61 seats during the 1960s to around 54 seats during the 1990s and 2000s. As a result, it took a much smaller inter-party seat swing to produce a switch in party control.

But the narrower majorities of the past two decades are not the entire explanation for the greater frequency of switches in party control. Another factor contributing to increased competition for control of the Senate has been an increase in the average inter-party seat swing in elections. The data in Table 5 show that the average inter-party swing of 5 seats between 2002 and 2008 was higher than the average for any of the previous four decades. Even though the average number of seats switching party control has not been increasing, and was actually considerably larger during the 1970s, the data in Table 6 show that the average inter-party seat swing increased because the direction of these seat switches became more consistent. Between 2002 and 2008, an average of 88% of seat switches favored the same party. This meant that the net seat swing produced by a given number of seat switches was considerably larger than in previous decades. In fact in both 2006 and 2008 all of the seat switches were in one direction with Democrats picking up 6 Republican seats in 2006 and 8 Republican seats in 2008 for a net gain of 14 seats in two elections.

The close balance of power in the Senate in recent years, combined with relatively large inter-party seat swings and frequent switches in party control, may themselves be exacerbating tensions between Democrats and Republicans in the chamber. Since 1994, control of the chamber has been in question in almost every election and given the large ideological differences between the parties, this means that the stakes in these elections are enormous. Despite the
filibuster rule, a Democratic Senate and a Republican Senate are going to produce very different legislative outcomes.

The Nationalization of Senate Elections: The Presidential Referendum Effect

Increased uniformity in the direction of seat switches in recent years appears to reflect the growing influence of national issues on voting in Senate elections. As ideological differences between the two major parties have increased, it seems that voters have increasingly come to view individual House and Senate contests as referenda on the performance of the national parties. As a result, in choosing a candidate to represent their district or state they are increasingly influenced by their evaluation of the president’s performance. This can be seen in Table 7 which displays the correlations between voters’ evaluation of the president’s job performance and their House and Senate votes over the past four decades, since the ANES began asking a presidential job performance question.

[Table 7 goes here]

The data in Table 7 show that there has been a fairly dramatic increase in the influence of evaluations of the president’s performance on voting for both House and Senate candidates over this time period. The size of the correlations has increased in every decade for both House and Senate elections. In the 1970s, presidential evaluations explained less than a tenth of the variance in House and Senate candidate choice. By the 2000s, however, presidential evaluations explained over a quarter of the variance in House candidate choice and almost a third of the variance in Senate candidate choice.

The influence of presidential evaluations on candidate choice appears to have been even stronger in some of the key Senate contests of 2006, the election in which Democrats gained six seats to take back control of the Senate. Table 8 displays the relationship between evaluations of
President Bush’s performance and Senate voting decisions in 8 of these competitive Senate races including all six contests in which Democrats picked up previously Republican seats: Virginia, Montana, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Rhode Island.

[Table 8 goes here]

In 7 of these 8 contests, voters were presented with a choice between a moderately to very liberal Democrat and a moderately to very conservative Republican. The only exception was Rhode Island where the Republican incumbent, Lincoln Chafee, generally regarded as the most moderate Republican in the Senate, faced a liberal Democrat, former state Attorney General Sheldon Whitehouse. In all 7 contests involving a choice between a liberal Democrat and a conservative Republican, there was a very strong relationship between evaluations of the president’s performance and the Senate vote with the overwhelming majority of those approving of President Bush’s performance voting for the Republican candidate and the overwhelming majority of those disapproving of President Bush’s performance voting for the Democratic candidate. The correlations for these 7 states ranged from .67 to .80. In the case of Rhode Island, however, the correlation was a much weaker .48. That was because in Rhode Island, Lincoln Chafee, who had broken with the Bush Administration on the war in Iraq and other major issues, won a third of the vote among those who disapproved of the President’s performance. This was more than twice the vote share of any other Republican candidate among voters disapproving of the President’s performance. Nevertheless, Chafee could not overcome the President’s unpopularity in his heavily Democratic state and lost his general election race to Sheldon Whitehouse.

Moderates like Lincoln Chafee are an endangered species in the Senate. That is because Senate primaries now almost always result in the nomination of a relatively liberal Democrat and
a relatively conservative Republican. In the Republican Party, especially, moderate incumbents have frequently had to contend with primary challenges from their right. Lincoln Chafee survived a difficult primary challenge from a strong conservative in 2006 before losing in the general election. More recently, one of the few remaining GOP moderates, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, switched parties in order to avoid a primary challenge in 2010 from the same hard-line conservative who almost defeated him in a 2004 primary.

The evidence from the 2006 election suggests that the rise of polarization in the Senate over the past several decades has contributed to changes in the behavior of voters. Thirty or 40 years ago, there were many moderate-to-liberal Republicans like Lincoln Chafee in the Senate along with a large number of moderate-to-conservative Democrats. They won elections by building coalitions that cut across party lines. As a result many of them were able to win in politically hostile territory and survive downturns in their party’s fortunes. The disappearance of these centrists means that the vast majority of Senate contests now involve a clear-cut choice between a relatively liberal Democrat and a relatively conservative Republican thereby reinforcing the influence of national issues such as presidential performance on voter decision-making.

Partisan Polarization and Representation: The Case of Health Care Reform

The rise of polarization in the Senate and in the public has had important consequences for the relationship between senators and their constituents. Since January of 2009 a number of political commentators have expressed disappointment at the continued bickering and lack of cooperation between Democratic and Republican leaders in Washington. But calls for bipartisanship ignore the deep ideological divide between the two parties in Washington and in
the electorate. Nowhere is this more evident than on what has emerged as the most important and contentious policy issue facing the country in 2009, the issue of health care reform.

Despite attempts to make health care legislation more palatable to Republicans by dropping provisions such as a public insurance option, and despite weeks of negotiations among a bipartisan group of senators known as the “gang of six,” Democratic efforts to win Republican support for health care reform have been almost entirely fruitless. Democrats and Republicans in Congress appear to be hopelessly divided on this issue. But the partisan divide on this issue is not confined to Washington. Based on the opinions expressed by Democratic and Republican voters in 2008, the divisions between Democratic and Republican leaders appear to mirror the divisions between Democratic and Republican voters.

[Figure 5 goes here]

Figure 5 displays the opinions of Democratic and Republican voters on a health care policy scale included in the 2008 American National Election Study. The ANES question asked respondents to place themselves on a 7-point scale indicating support or opposition to a plan to have the federal government pay for all of the cost of medical care for Americans. The results demonstrate that even before the debate over health care reform began in earnest in Washington, the American public was deeply divided on this issue with Democratic identifiers and leaners overwhelmingly supporting a universal health care plan and Republican identifiers and leaners overwhelmingly opposing such a plan: almost three-fourths of Democrats placed themselves at 1 or 2 on the scale while almost two-thirds of Republicans placed themselves at 6 or 7. Contrary to the argument of some scholars that there is a disconnect between the Washington political elite and the public and that only the political elite is truly polarized (Fiorina 2006; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006), this evidence indicates there is no disconnect between the political elite and
the public on the issue of health care. The deep partisan divide in Washington reflects a deep partisan divide within the American electorate.

Polarization and the Future of the Senate

Since 1980, Senate majorities have generally been relatively narrow and shifts in party control of the Senate have occurred fairly frequently. The current 60-seat Democratic majority is by far the largest for either party in the past two decades. In fact, one has to go back to 1977-79 to find a larger majority. The question this raises is whether this expanded Democratic majority signals a long-term shift in party strength or whether it will turn out to be a temporary phenomenon caused by dissatisfaction with the performance of the Bush Administration. The results of the next few elections will answer this question. In 2010, however, Republican opportunities for gains may be limited. Although midterm elections usually produce losses for the president’s party in the Senate, in 2010 Republicans will be defending 18 of the 36 seats that are up for election. In 2012, however, Republicans will have a much better opportunity to recoup some of the losses that they suffered in the 2006 and 2008 elections because Democrats will have to defend 24 of the 33 seats that will be up for election.

The results of the 2010 Senate elections will depend on how voters evaluate President Obama’s performance during his first two years in office. In the long run, however, Democrats will probably find it very difficult to maintain a 60 seat majority in the Senate. Since the end of World War II, Senate majorities of 60 or larger have been unusual and the current 60-seat Democratic majority represents a sharp break with the recent pattern of relatively small majorities. While Democrats now enjoy an edge in party identification in the electorate, their advantage among regular voters is fairly small. Moreover, Democrats now hold a large number of seats that would appear to be vulnerable in the event of an incumbent retirement or a national
Republican tide. The data in Table 9 show that Democrats currently hold 11 Senate seats in states that were carried by the Republican Party in all three presidential elections since 2000 as well as 11 seats in states that were carried by the Republicans in two of these three elections. In contrast, Republicans only hold two seats in states that were carried by the Democratic Party in all three presidential elections and only two additional seats in states that were carried by the Democrats in two of these elections.

[Table 9 goes here]

Some of the greater vulnerability of Senate Democrats reflects the Senate’s small state bias. Republicans have carried 12 of the 20 least populous states in all three presidential elections since 2000 while Democrats have only carried five of these states in all three elections. Taken together, the 20 least populous states have about six million fewer residents than the state of California. However, these states elect 40 percent of the Senate. Republicans only hold two of the 10 seats from the five small Democratic states. However, Democrats currently hold 11 of the 24 seats from the 12 small Republican states including both seats from Arkansas, Montana, North Dakota, and West Virginia. Incumbent retirements or a national Republican tide could put many of these Democratic seats in jeopardy.

Regardless of which party controls the Senate or the size of its majority, however, the ideological divide separating the parties is almost certain to remain very large and bipartisanship is almost certain to remain an elusive goal for the foreseeable future. That is because the divisions between Democrats and Republicans in the Senate reflect divisions between Democrats and Republicans in the electorate and those divisions are greatest among the politically engaged partisans who pay attention to what their elected representatives are doing and vote in primary elections.
Based on the evidence presented in this paper, polarization is not going away any time soon and this has potentially important implications for the legislative process in the Senate. Polarization is producing growing frustration among members of the majority party with Senate rules that allow the minority party to block or delay legislation. We have seen clear signs of this frustration in threats by Republican leaders to invoke the so-called “nuclear option” to prevent filibusters over judicial nominations during President Bush’s second term and in discussions by Democrats of the possibility of using the cumbersome reconciliation process to prevent a Republican filibuster of health care reform legislation in 2009. Given the deep ideological divide that separates the two parties today, a return to relatively narrow majorities in the future is likely to increase the level of frustration of members of the majority party as cloture becomes even more difficult to invoke. At some point, this may well lead to renewed efforts to change the Senate’s rules to reduce the ability of the minority party to block legislation by making it easier to invoke cloture or to use floor procedures that prevent filibusters.
References


Figure 1
Ideologies of Democrats and Republicans in 111\textsuperscript{th} Senate

Source: DW-NOMINATE scores for 110th Senate with authors' estimates for new members
Table 1
Ideology in the 91\textsuperscript{st} and 111\textsuperscript{th} Senates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>91\textsuperscript{st} Senate</th>
<th>111\textsuperscript{th} Senate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderates</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libs and Cons</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Libs and Cons</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on DW-NOMINATE scores
Figure 2
Nonwhite Share of Democratic and Republican Senate Voters by Decade

Source: American National Election Studies
Figure 3
Mean Liberal-Conservative Score of Democratic and Republican Senate Voters by Decade

Source: American National Election Studies
Figure 4
Party Loyalty and Ticket Splitting in U.S. Senate Elections by Decade

Source: American National Election Studies
Table 2
Geographic Polarization in Four Competitive Presidential Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4.99%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9.99%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14.99%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15% +</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: uselectionatlas.org
Table 3
Changing Partisan Composition of States Represented by Democratic and Republican Senators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safe, Solid</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Risk</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: swingstateproject.com and data compiled by author
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composition of State or District</th>
<th>House Dems</th>
<th>Senate Dems</th>
<th>House Dems</th>
<th>Senate Dems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safe, Solid</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Risk</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Members)</td>
<td>(257)</td>
<td>(60)</td>
<td>(178)</td>
<td>(40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: swingstateproject.com and data compiled by author
### Table 5
The Decline of Competition in U.S. Senate Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>LT 10</th>
<th>10-20</th>
<th>20+</th>
<th>(Contests)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1962-1970</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>(180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-1980</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>(170)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1990</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>(168)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-2000</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>(174)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2008</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>(136)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CQ Guide to U.S. Elections, CNN
Table 6
Seat Changes, Seat Swing, and Majority Control Changes in U.S. Senate Elections by Decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Avg. Seat Changes</th>
<th>Same Direction</th>
<th>Avg. Swing</th>
<th>Avg. Majority</th>
<th>Control Changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1962-1970</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-1980</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1990</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-2000</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2008</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CQ Guide to U.S. Elections, CNN
Table 7
Average Correlations of House and Senate Votes with Presidential Job Evaluations by Decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>House Vote</th>
<th>Senate Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972-1980</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1990</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-2000</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2008</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American National Election Studies
Table 8  
Percentage Voting Democratic by Bush Job Evaluation in Eight Competitive 2006 Senate Contests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Approve</th>
<th>Disapprove</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Correlation coefficient is Spearman’s rho

Source: 2006 Exit Polls
Figure 5
Preferences of Democratic and Republican Senate Voters on Universal Health Care in 2008

Source: 2008 American National Election Study
Table 9  
Number of Times Senator’s State Carried by Party’s Presidential Candidate, 2000-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Times Carried</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: uselectionatlas.org