



Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Are Changing Constituencies Driving Rising Polarization in the U.S. House of Representatives?

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Introduction

Virtually all observers of American politics agree that there is a high degree of polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties in Congress. There is also a general consensus that this interparty polarization has been increasing over time: The ideological gap separating the parties of Tip O’Neill and Gerald Ford in the 1970s may have been large, but it was smaller than the distance between the Clinton Democrats and the Gingrich Republicans in the 1990s, and smaller still than the gulf between the parties of Obama and Boehner today. There is much less consensus, however, as to the causes of this rising polarization. Many authors have noted the role of the so-called “Southern Realignment”—the gradual transition of the Southern congressional delegation (through attrition, replacement, and—in some cases—party-switching) from a Democratic to a Republican stronghold. Others have hypothesized, variously, that rising polarization in Congress may be caused by gerrymandering, rising income inequality, closed primary elections, or poorly structured campaign finance laws.

Some scholars have claimed that rising polarization in Congress has been driven at least in part by changes in the nature and distribution of the electorate.¹ One theoretical model argues that the voting behavior of elected representatives is determined by four factors: the policy preferences of the members themselves, the preferences of the national political party to which members belong, the preferences of within-district constituencies, and the preferences of the within-district subconstituency likely to support the representative.² In particular, the notion that a lawmaker’s voting behavior is determined (in part) by the preferences of within-district voters has been fairly well supported in the literature.³ Under the reasonable assumption that this relationship does hold—i.e., on average, conservative districts tend to elect conservative members, and liberal districts liberal members—one possible explanation for rising polarization in Congress is the “Big Sort.” This term describes the hypothesis—first proposed by Bill Bishop—that in recent decades, politically like-minded voters have become less diffuse and more clustered as a result of geographic “sorting” along economic, demographic, religious,

¹ Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Mark D. Brewer, and Mack D. Mariani, *Diverging Parties: Social Change, Realignment, and Party Polarization*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003; Richard Fleisher and John R. Bond, “The Shrinking Middle in Congress,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 2004.

² Steven D. Levitt, “How Do Senators Vote? Disentangling the Role of Voter Preferences, Party Affiliation, and Senator Ideology,” *American Economic Review*, June 1996.

³ Kristina C. Miller, “The Limitations of Heuristics for Political Elites,” *Political Psychology*, December 2009.

and lifestyle lines.⁴ Since members of the House represent specific geographic regions, clustering of like-minded voters into House districts could contribute to polarization in Congress as members respond to gradual changes in constituency preferences.⁵

Our aim is to test this two-part hypothesis: Is the clustering described by Bishop in fact occurring? And if so, is it contributing to polarization in the House of Representatives? In Chapter Two, we provide evidence to support Bishop's hypothesis by showing that clustering across congressional districts has gradually increased along several lines—specifically income, education, and marriage. In Chapter Three, we present results from three analytical models designed to test the hypothesis that this clustering has contributed to growing polarization in the U.S. Congress since the mid-1970s. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and the implications they have for continued polarization and gridlock in Congress.

⁴ Bill Bishop with Robert Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. Bishop uses the term *sorting* to describe this phenomenon; we use the term *clustering* to avoid confusion—other scholars have used the term *sorting* to describe the nongeographic process of conservatives increasingly identifying with the Republican party and liberals increasingly identifying with the Democratic party.

⁵ See “Legislator Ideology as a Function of Constituency Attributes” in the Appendix for a simple model of how legislators’ ideology might be modeled as a function of constituency attributes.