THE CURRENT CONGRESS—THE 111TH—IS THE most ideologically polarized in modern history. In both the House and the Senate, the most conservative Democrat is more liberal than is the most liberal Republican. If one defines the congressional “center” as the overlap between the two parties, the center has disappeared.

As David Brady and Hahrie Hahn have shown, this situation is not unprecedented. Party polarization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was as intense as it is today. In the sweep of American history, one might well argue, the ideologically overlapping and indistinct organizations of the mid-twentieth century are the outliers, not today’s highly differentiated and adversarial parties.

Still, the unending high-decibel partisan warfare of the past decade has led many Americans...
to look back with nostalgia on the more consensual, if muddled, party system that persisted until the 1970s.

Morris Fiorina and colleagues have suggested that this increased polarization is mostly confined to party elites and elected representatives and that the ideological center of gravity of the people has not changed much in the past generation. But an analysis of National Election Study data challenges this view. Alan Abramowitz finds that in 1984, 41 percent of voters were located at or near the ideological center, versus only 10 percent at or near the left and right extremes. By 2004, only 28 percent remained at or near the center, while the left and right extremes had more than doubled to 23 percent. Indeed, Abramowitz suggests, polarization actually rose faster in the electorate than among elites between 1972 and 2004. (See Figure 1.)

Other evidence points in the same direction. If elected officials were becoming less representative of the electorate, we would expect to find that the ideological gap between the people and their representatives had increased. But as Gary Jacobson has shown, this has not happened. On the contrary, voters believe that their party and its elected officials have tracked their views quite closely during the past generation. (See Figure 2.)

The gap has widened, instead, between voters and their perception of the other party’s ideological orientation. All other things equal, the greater the distance between voters and opposition party candidates, the less cross-party voting there should be. And that is exactly what has happened in the past generation: the percentages of Democratic identifiers voting for Republicans and Republican identifiers voting for Democrats have fallen by about half. (See Figure 3.)

These correlations have not ended the debate about the dynamics of party change. It remains true that less-informed and less-engaged citizens—voters as well as non-voters—tend to be less polarized than are those who participate reg-
ularly and with higher levels of information. It is at least possible that the current level of polarization actively drives lower-information voters out of the process and that a less polarized system would both expand and moderate the electorate. In addition, it may be argued, as Fiorina and others have, that those who now participate have shifted their outlook in response to changes at the elite level: if the parties put forward more centrist candidates, the electorate’s views would move back toward the center.9 For example, ideological differences were muted in 1976 when a relatively conservative Democrat, Jimmy Carter, ran against a moderate Republican, incumbent President Gerald Ford. A 2012 contest between former New York Governor George Pataki and soon-to-be-former Indiana Senator Evan Bayh would evoke a similar response, or so the argument goes. (The improbability that either would receive his party’s nomination underscores how much has changed since the 1970s.)

The opposing thesis is that the parties simply have responded to new political opportunities in the electorate. It is not hard to find anecdotal evidence to support this proposition. As Lyndon Johnson predicted and George Wallace’s insurgency demonstrated, the Civil Rights push of the mid-1960s decoupled many whites from the Democratic party and created the opening for both Richard Nixon’s “southern strategy” and his appeal to urban white ethnic voters, also known as “forgotten Americans.” The Roe v. Wade decision opened the door for a new entente between religious traditionalists—evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics, even Orthodox Jews—and the Republican Party. Conversely, the Republican embrace of southern-tinged religious and social conservatism pushed many upscale professionals who were fiscally conservative but socially moderate toward the Democrats. (John Anderson’s independent presidential campaign in 1980 was an early sign of their increasing disaffection from the Republican party.) And the inability of the Reagan administration to match tax cuts with spending cuts spurred rising concern about the federal budget deficit, sparking the Perot insurgency in 1992 and influencing Bill Clinton’s turn toward fiscal retrenchment in 1993.

Some observers have suggested that members of the “Tea Party” movement represent the latest chapter in this saga of electoral change. The results of a recent in-depth survey call this thesis into question. It turns out that 74 percent of the Tea Partiers are Republicans or Republican-leaning independents, and 77 percent voted for John McCain in 2008. Ninety-two percent are dissatisfied with the way things are going in America; 83 percent believe that government is doing too many things better left to individuals or the private sector; and only 4 percent trust government.10 While some of them might be disaffected enough to field independent candidacies, they seem very unlikely to shift their allegiance toward the Democratic Party in anything like its current incarnation. In the main, they are insurgent, libertarian-leaning Republicans who are trying to move their party back toward the small government orthodoxy that they see George W. Bush and the Republican congressional majority as having abandoned in the decade just ended.

As Peter Brown, the assistant director of the Quinnipiac Polling Institute puts it, “they...are not in a traditional sense swing voters.”11

Over the past decade, the costs of increased political polarization have been mounting. We are unable to deal with large questions—such as our fiscal crisis—that cannot be solved without bipartisan cooperation and mutual compromise. Staffing our governing institutions has become more difficult: many judicial nominations have gotten caught in the partisan cross-fire, and even executive branch appointments have bogged down, making it hard for incoming presidents to deal with pressing problems. When one party dominates both the executive and legislative branches, polarization often moves policy in directions that moderate and independent voters find troubling, which tends to produce
abrupt lurches from one off-center majority to another. When power is divided, polarized parties find it hard to agree on much of significance. Polarization means that our debates no longer stop at the water’s edge, which makes it harder for the United States to maintain a steady stance on defense and foreign policy. And perhaps worst of all, polarization undermines public trust in government, now languishing near record lows.

As I draft these remarks, the most likely outcome of the November mid-term elections is a new round of divided government. If so, we will face a choice between gridlock and a degree of cooperation across party lines that we have not seen in quite some time. In less troubled times, we might be able to afford a year or two of inaction. But with an ongoing economic crisis and two foreign wars, we need prompt, coherent, and sustainable policies. It remains to be seen whether our polarized party system is up to the job. The evidence of recent years is anything but encouraging.

Endnotes

1 Portions of this essay first appeared as “Can a Polarized American Party System Be ‘Healthy’?” in the Brookings Institution’s Issues in Governance Studies 34 (April 2010).


3 The trend in polarization among voters is based on the difference between mean scores of Democratic and Republican identifiers and leaners on the seven-point liberal-conservative scale. The trend in polarization among elites is based on the difference between mean scores of Democratic and Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives on the first dimension DW-nominate scale. Polarization scores from 1972 are used as a baseline for both series. Sources: National Election Studies cumulative data file; DW-nominate scores compiled by Keith T. Poole (voteview.com/dwnomin.htm). Alan I. Abramowitz, “Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?” Reprinted with permission from Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., Red and Blue Nation? Causes and Consequences of America’s Polarized Parties (Washington: Brookings, 2006) 81.


11 Quinnipiac University Polling Institute 2010.
Why We’re Polarized fails to establish that polarization is the root of our democracy’s discontents. But the fact that America’s two major parties are now more ideologically and demographically distinct than ever before—while their respective partisans are more tightly wedded to their team and distrustful of the other one than at any time in living memory—is still a consequential development. And Klein’s account of how this came to be has much to recommend it. Using differential equations, new model explains why US political parties increasingly polarize despite voters’ views remaining in the center. A quick look at social media posts shows how US political parties are increasingly polarized. Is this growing move to extremism due to a shift in voters’ views? A new model developed by a team including Northwestern researchers shows it is not. Instead, the study demonstrates that polarization stems from the two parties’ quest for voters. The team found that polarization is instead tied to the ideological homogeneity within the constituencies of the two major parties. To differentiate themselves, the politicians of the parties move further away from the center. The new model helps explains why. Why do ordinary people vote to return to office undemocratic incumbents? New survey experiments in several countries suggest that many voters are willing to put... in sharply polarized electorates, even voters who value democracy will be willing to sacrifice fair democratic competition for the sake of electing politicians who champion their interests. When punishing a leader’s authoritarian tendencies requires voting for a platform, party, or person that his supporters detest, many will find this too high a price to pay. Polarization thus presents aspiring authoritarians with a structural opportunity: They can undermine democracy and get away with it.10. WHY WE’re POLARIZED By Ezra Klein. My first reaction to any book about our polarization is Oh, no, not another one. We have a ton of books and many more articles and op-eds about the polarized state of our politics, our elections and our country. So the question about Why We’re Polarized was whether its author had anything meaningful to add. But sport fandom aside, America has gone from people having overlapping and intersecting identities to where there is now a set of political mega-identities. Klein writes that these identities are now stacked on top of one another so that challenging one of them challenges all of them. Klein says that polarization has given the Democratic Party the flu, the Republican Party has caught pneumonia. Polarization is a natural way that party systems, particularly ones that are structured like ours, will eventually evolve. But as you see, what’s different about our political system, and this is really unappreciated I think, is it is not designed so that if you win power in a polarizing election, in an election where both sides are angry and one side wins and the other loses, then you can actually govern. America is the only system with a long history of constitutional continuity that works like ours does. And so, then you get the question of, well, why did it work here? And the answer that Linz gives to why it worked here, and he’s writing this, I think it’s a 1991 paper, is that America uniquely has these very mixed political parties. You have liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats.