

Chapter 5. Constituency Representation in Congress: In General and in Periods of Higher and Lower Partisan Polarization

Soren Jordan*, Kim Quaile Hill, and Patricia A. Hurley

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The page numbers here are consistent with the published version. Corresponding author: Soren Jordan, scj0014@auburn.edu.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Auburn University; contact author email: scj0014@auburn.edu.

Abstract

Political scientists have produced abundant research on how members of the U.S. Congress represent the preferences and interests of their constituents. Yet there is no agreement in that research on how one might best summarize the character of representation empirically or judge its quality normatively. We argue this situation arises because the bulk of research has failed to take account of fundamental insights from early empirical work on this topic. In this essay, we summarize a systematic theory of representation from our earlier research that helps resolve this intellectual impasse. Our party polarization and issue complexity theory accounts well for the different forms (or models) that representation might take that were anticipated by early research and thus provides a good overall characterization of constituency representation. Yet it can also account for other important aspects of congressional behavior. Some of the most prominent concerns about such behavior have been with the effects of the increased ideological polarization of the two major parties of the last few decades. As we explain in detail in this essay, our theory can account for two important such effects: how constituency representation has both changed in some respects and stayed the same in others as the major parties became more polarized ideologically.

The principal normative purpose of a democratic government is to ensure the preferences of the general public are represented in government policy. How well that expectation is realized in national politics in the United States is, in good part, dependent on how members of Congress represent the geographic constituencies that elected them. Despite a huge body of research on representation in Congress, however, with new studies of the topic published in major scholarly journals and books every year, there is no consensus among political scientists about whether constituency representation is generally good or poor, whether some constituents are better represented than others, or about the varied ways members of Congress might represent the preferences and interests of their constituents.

This essay offers answers to the preceding questions by explicating the research in our book *Representation in Congress: A Unified Theory*.¹ In the latter research, we took account of the different assumptions in past scholarship on the character of representation and how it should be examined, and we adopted those assumptions that appeared to be most promising. Then, we crafted a systematic theory of constituency representation that makes a priori predictions about the different ways members of Congress offer representation to their

constituencies and that indicates which constituents, if any, are best represented on different kinds of policy issues. We offered considerable evidence for the latter predictions, and this *empirical* work suggests answers to various *normative* questions about the quality of representation. In this essay, we also extend the work in our book through an original investigation of whether patterns of representation today, in an era of very high party polarization, are different from past periods of lower polarization and more bipartisan congressional policy making.

Classic and Contemporary Research on Constituency Representation in Congress

A lack of consensus in the research literature about the character of representation exists, in good part, because the bulk of existing scholarship fails to take account of fundamental assumptions about representation from the earliest scientific research on that topic and especially the seminal publication on the subject by Warren Miller and Donald Stokes in 1963.²

Miller and Stokes, like virtually all the scholars writing in the same period, assumed there was no single, overall way to characterize how members of Congress represented the policy preferences of their constituents in voting on legislative proposals. Instead, members might effectively provide different kinds of representation on different issues. In the language of this early research, which is still used in congressional politics textbooks, if not much contemporary basic science research, different “models” of representation were thought to arise on different policy issues. On issues that especially divided the two major parties in the general public and in Congress (and which, thus, demonstrated high party *polarization*), Miller and Stokes hypothesized that members would represent the preferences of their copartisan constituents instead of the preferences of the average constituent or the median voter—providing, then, what has been labeled *responsible-party* representation.

On issues for which a member’s constituents of both parties share a common preference, the member was hypothesized to vote for the constituency-wide preference—either because he or she shared the same view and was demonstrating *belief-sharing* representation or because the member felt compelled to follow constituency preferences as an *instructed delegate*.

Miller and Stokes also anticipated that on some issues, the elite and the general-public members of both parties might be internally divided on the best policy course *or* that the party elites might be divided while constituencies would not have a clear policy preference. On the latter sorts of issues, members would not face a clear policy “signal” from either their national party or their constituency and would have to make policy decisions based on their own judgment, thus providing *trustee* representation.

Miller and Stokes and other scholars writing at the same time offered suggestive evidence for the appearance of these different models of representation on different issues. Yet despite their research being conceptually and methodologically

innovative for its time, it was not sufficiently rigorous to confirm that such patterns generally arise *or* to develop a theory to account for when and why they arise.

Only rarely has later scholarship taken account of these alternative models of representation. Instead, the vast majority of research after Miller and Stokes has attempted to assess what might be called the most common or “average” form of representation occurring at any one time. To do so, such research typically calculates averaged constituency preferences (on some scale, from being highly liberal to highly conservative) across a wide range of issues. Then, legislators’ policy decisions on roll call votes are also averaged across many issues, and legislators’ averaged policy positions are compared with their constituencies’ averaged positions to assess how closely the two match.³

Research like that described above attempts to create a parsimonious, summary estimate of representation. Yet such research has foundered as a basis for constructing systematic theory for at least two reasons. First, it aggregates across too many different forms of representation that are operating simultaneously, as Miller and Stokes hypothesized to be the case and as our research to be discussed here confirms. Because delegate, belief-sharing, responsible-party, and trustee representation are all occurring simultaneously, even if some are more numerous than others, an average across all of them cannot portray any of the single models well. Thus, such an averaged mode of analysis offers a distorted *empirical* characterization of issue representation. Because it does not seek evidence for the alternative models of representation, it also cannot inform us about when and why the different models arise.

The fact that different models of representation arise simultaneously for different policy issues means that different constituency groups are being favored on different issues, *and* for some models, there is no literal representation of constituency preferences. Thus, *normative* assessments of the quality of representation—whether it is good or poor, for example—based on an averaged characterization that ignores the existence of the different models must also be biased or incomplete.

Second, because different studies attempting to assess average representation use different combinations of policy issues to estimate average constituency preferences and legislator roll call vote positions, the findings of those studies can differ for these research design considerations alone. Any single study might offer only a distinctive, distorted characterization of representation. Thus, the comparability of different studies can be compromised, and the findings of research across different ones cannot cumulate to a valid overall depiction of even the average character or process of representation.

In light of the preceding discussion, a fundamental goal for research on representation should be to develop rigorous evidence that either confirms or dis- confirms the expectation that different models of representation arise on different policy issues. Research of the latter sort should also lead to an understanding of the conditions under which—or one might say the reasons why—different models arise on different issues, if they do. And such an understanding should ideally accumulate into a systematic theory of representation.

But even brief consideration of the alternative models suggests a second puzzle: Does the prevalence of the different models change under conditions of higher or lower polarization between the two major parties? As is widely known, the major parties have advocated especially different ideological preferences on very many issues since the late 1990s. Thus, the parties are said to be highly *polarized* because they are highly unified internally but also widely separated from each other in their ideological stances. Yet such polarization is unusual in the post-World War II era. Perhaps, then, responsible-party representation predominates today, and belief-sharing, delegate, and trustee representation have largely disappeared. Conversely, the latter models of representation might have been more common in periods of lower polarization and partisan representation less common. To complicate the preceding concerns and to heighten their importance, several recent studies provide evidence that members of Congress are today much more ideologically extreme than their constituencies and argue that constituency representation might be entirely compromised for that reason, although the accuracy and meaning of such evidence has been challenged.⁴

In sum, two important puzzles have not been addressed by contemporary scholarship. First, do the alternative models of representation commonly arise, and if they do arise, under what conditions? And second, does the prevalence of the alternative models rise or fall with varying levels of polarization? Because contemporary scholarship has not addressed the first of these questions, it also cannot provide an answer to the second one. Yet our recent research, reported in detail in our book *Representation in Congress: A Unified Theory* provides a systematic theory to solve the first of these puzzles. That theory also logically implies how one can address the second puzzle, as we do here.

The Party Polarization and Issue Complexity Theory of Constituency Representation

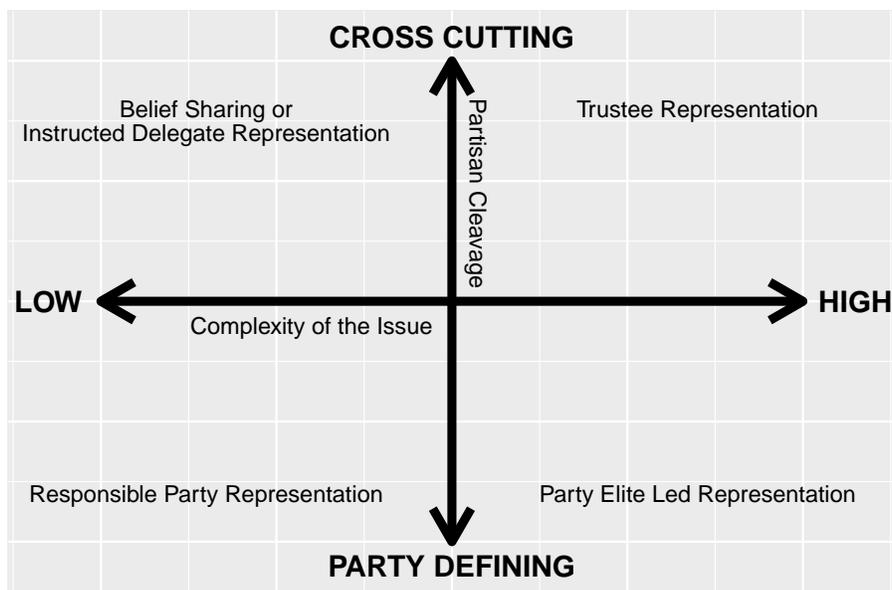
A scientific theory is a leap of intellectual faith. One creates a theory based on consideration of past research and intuition about how a comprehensive explanation for some phenomenon, like constituency representation, arises and the forms it might take. Such a theory might be simple or complex, and it might seem compellingly commonsensical or radically nonsensical. Yet one must marshal sufficient empirical evidence for any such theory to convince other scholars that it is meritorious.

The construction of theory can also be deliberate or remarkably casual, and one can cite examples of both sorts in every science. Perhaps because it is a young discipline, political science has many so-called theories that are casually—or one could say poorly—developed and stated. We have sought to be highly deliberate and “transparent” in the creation of our theory, and the full exposition of the theory in *Representation in Congress* explains, in detail, the assumptions on which it is based, the key concepts for (or attributes of) the policy issues it includes, and the predictions based on those assumptions and attributes. The full theory includes lengthy discussions of those several parts. Here, we only summarize the ones that are especially fundamental for understanding the theory.

The theory assumes, first, that different models of representation can arise simultaneously on different policy issues. That is, members of Congress will be voting on different bills in ways that indicate they are providing different forms of representation at the same time. The type of representation they provide on each issue—that is, the model of representation indicated by their roll call voting—will also be shaped by two factors. One factor is how easy or difficult particular policy issues are for the general public to understand and, thus, whether constituencies demonstrate discoverable, relatively liberal or conservative policy positions that might guide legislator behavior. The second factor is how polarized the parties in Congress have themselves been, in liberal versus conservative positions, on the issues. When the national parties have distinctive positions on issues, they also send signals that might affect legislators' roll call voting. Thus, we have named this the *party polarization and issue complexity theory* based on the importance of these critical determinants of when different models of representation arise. We also assume that specific issues can evolve over time in terms of which model of representation they evoke, as abortion, civil rights, and social welfare policy (as but three good examples) have been demonstrated to evolve in past scholarship.⁵ Such *issue evolution* comes about when the complexity of an issue for public understanding or the parties' relative positions on it change notably.

Principally based on the preceding assumptions, our theory predicts that five different models of representation exist in congressional roll call voting, with different models applying to different types of policy. Figure 5-1 presents a depiction of how the two primary attributes of policy issues discussed above relate to the appearance of these five models. We also explain, in modest detail, how these attributes are expected to generate each particular model.

Figure 5-1. Models of Representation Predicted to Arise Under Varying Conditions of Party Polarization and Issue Complexity



The theory predicts that *responsible-party* representation will arise on policy issues that are easy for the public to understand—thus, on which legislative constituencies can easily form identifiable preferences—and on which the two major parties have well-established polarized positions among both their elite and general-public members. The theory anticipates, further, that incumbent legislators will respond more to the preferences of their constituency copartisans than to those of the full constituency on such issues but also that the policy preferences of legislators themselves and those of their constituency copartisans mutually influence and reinforce each other. As we state in our book, “Partisan constituents expect the continuation of the policies on such issues, and elected members of the party reinforce such expectations through continued emphasis of the party’s commitment to such policies.”⁶ Observe, too, that incumbent legislators share the preferences of the bulk of their fellow partisans in Congress, as well as of their constituency copartisans, on such issues. Thus, one might say they are encouraged to sustain their commitment to specific policies on such issues by a signal from their colleagues in Congress and one from their copartisan constituents.

In an especially notable contrast, as depicted in Figure 5-1, the theory anticipates that *trustee* representation will arise on policy issues that are difficult for the public to understand (and thus, on which it is difficult for constituencies to reach a consensus preference either among the full constituency or in its Democratic or Republican subsets) and on which the parties in Congress are themselves internally divided. On such issues, members of Congress have no signal from either their fellow partisans in Congress or from their full or copartisan constituencies for what position they should adopt. They then have the necessity—or the luxury—of adopting policy positions based on their own judgments. A good deal of research has uncovered instances of such trustee representation where legislators make policy decisions on personal grounds, such as their religious preferences or personal experiences or on beliefs about what policy is in the best interest of the nation.⁷

Belief-sharing or *instructed-delegate* representation arise when policy issues are easy for the general public to understand and when members of both parties, in the general public and in Congress, might adopt the same position on the issues. Indeed, the theory anticipates that Democratic and Republican constituents will widely share the same policy preference on such issues. And because the national parties in the Congress do not send distinct signals to their members about how to vote on such issues, legislators are free to respond to the constituency-wide preference (which also means they are responding to their mass copartisans in their districts, as well as to other constituents there).

Belief-sharing and delegate representation, then, share some common attributes. But they are distinguished in an important way that draws upon ideas from early research on representation and that is highly relevant to some contemporary behavior of members of Congress. Scholarly students of representation in the 1950s and 1960s were especially sensitive to the fact that on some policy issues, there might be a widespread policy consensus in a constituency that the legislator

for the district disagreed with but felt compelled to follow. Lewis Anthony Dexter observed, after interviews with members of Congress in the 1950s, that many of them understood that their constituents held strong preferences on some policy issues that they themselves disagreed with, and “when the chips are down . . . they will vote against their convictions and for their constituents’ preferences.”⁸ Many other scholars offer evidence for such *delegate* representation, where the legislator bows to a widespread preference in the constituency he or she does not share.

Belief-sharing issues, in contrast, are ones where the member of Congress personally shares the consensus policy position in the district. In his classic study of U.S. senators, Donald R. Matthews refers to this as a “natural harmony between the views of the senator and his constituents.”⁹ In such cases, members of Congress are expected to vote in response to the widely shared position among their constituents, but they are not compelled to do so against their own preferences, as in the case of delegate representation.

One broad category of belief-sharing policy issues might be casually called “apple pie and motherhood” ones. Bills before Congress that would provide new material benefits to members of the armed forces, veterans, or their families are good examples from that category. Yet at times, major foreign-policy issues, as well as ones on many other topics, have engendered widespread public consensus, as well as consensus among both Democrats and Republicans in Congress and thus have induced belief-sharing representation. As one example, in recent election campaigns, many Democratic and Republican members of Congress have aggressively promoted the facts that they are gun owners, hunters, and perhaps even members of the National Rifle Association, and for these reasons, they are opposed to new laws that would regulate gun ownership. Most of these legislators represent congressional districts or states where gun ownership is common and where many constituents share the legislator’s views.¹⁰ Such members of Congress are actively promoting the fact that they share their constituents’ policy views on this topic and thus are exhibiting behavior compatible with the belief-sharing model.¹¹

Our theory also identifies a final model of representation, which we label the *elite-led* model, that has not been discussed in earlier research on representation but that is compatible with much of what we know about party elite behavior in Congress. The theory predicts that this model will arise on policy issues that are difficult for the general public to understand and thus take clear positions on but on which the party elites in Congress are highly polarized. The theory also predicts that on such issues, the only representational “linkage” will be from the preferences of members of Congress to those of their constituency copartisans. Issues like this doubtless arise from time to time, and it is widely recognized that members of Congress and party leaders attempt to “lobby” their constituents to adopt the policy preference of the party elite. Some of these efforts succeed, and thus, the linkage from incumbent legislators’ preferences to those of their mass copartisans will eventually be observed. But many efforts of this sort have also failed.

Evidence in Support of the Party Polarization and Issue Complexity Theory

The value of a scientific theory is best illustrated in the degree to which it predicts successfully the phenomena it is intended to explain. To satisfy the latter criterion, we mounted a large number of tests of the predictions from the theory about *when* alternative models of representation should arise and for some of the underlying details about *why* they arise under those circumstances. The most rigorous and complete evidence comes from investigation of ten policy cases, drawn from the late 1950s to the early 2000s. Complete tests of the expectations for when specific models of representation occur require data that are very difficult to acquire, thus limiting the number of cases we could subject to complete analysis. Yet the findings of these analyses provide strong support for the theory.

As examples, analyses of data on abortion policy in the early 2000s and on social welfare policy in the late 1950s and early 2000s confirmed our prediction that responsible-party representation would arise because all three of these cases demonstrated high party polarization and were easy for the general public to understand. Comparably, civil rights policy in the late 1950s, military spending policy in the early 1980s, and social welfare policy in the late 1970s all demonstrated belief-sharing representation, as was predicted, because they were easy for the public to understand, and both parties in Congress took generally the same political position on them, *or* they were sufficiently divided that members could defer to their constituents' preferences in light of the weak "signal" from their fellow partisans in Congress. Finally—and again, as predicted based on their attributes on measures of issue easiness and of party polarization—abortion policy in the late 1970s and foreign policy in the late 1950s demonstrated trustee representation.¹²

In addition to the comprehensive theory tests summarized above, we assembled data to test more limited implications of the theory for a number of other policy issues, including AIDS funding in the late 1990s (a responsible-party issue), defense spending in the late 2000s (a belief-sharing issue), gun control in the early 1990s (a weakly belief-sharing issue at this time), prayer in school in the late 1990s (a party-elite-led issue), support for the Strategic Defense Initiative in the late 1990s (a trustee issue), and support for the Violence Against Women Act in the late 2000s (a belief-sharing issue). All of these tests also produce evidence in support of the theory.

Indeed, some of the latter tests provide especially valuable information. The tests for the ten policy cases that we examined more intensively confirm predictions from the theory about *when* different models of representation arise (evidence for so-called causal effects). But some of the less comprehensive tests provide evidence for *why* different models arise in particular circumstances (evidence for so-called causal processes).

Polarization in American Politics and in Congress and Its Implications for Constituency Representation

The preceding sections of this essay indicate that our theory provides a good explanation for the patterns of representation provided by members of the Congress to their constituents. That is, the theory provides a good explanation for representation, as we will say, *at any one time*. Yet the theory can also help explain how patterns of representation will change as party polarization varies from relatively low to relatively high.

News accounts, as well as many scholarly works, often suggest that the rise of high party polarization in contemporary times has carried all arenas of policy in its wake so that all policy issues have become polarized into conservative-versus-liberal questions. Additionally, given how dominant polarization seems to be in contemporary politics, it may be difficult to imagine how the policy views of the Democratic and Republican members of Congress might be expressed in other ways. But high party polarization has not always been the norm in American politics. And we first illustrate the different political climates of periods of high and low polarization with two sets of quotations taken from leading candidates in United States presidential elections placed fifty years apart.

In the first set of quotations—both from the first presidential debate in 1960—the Republican, Richard M. Nixon, and the eventually victorious Democrat, John F. Kennedy, almost compete to take moderate stands on a variety of important societal issues. Now considered to be an almost impossible goal, Senator Kennedy tries to convey an ambition to expand social programs without spending undue amounts of federal money:

There have been statements made that the Democratic platform would cost a good deal of money and that I am in favor of unbalancing the budget. That is wholly wrong, wholly in error . . . my view is that you can do these programs—and they should be carefully drawn—within a balanced budget if our economy is moving ahead.

Concurrently, Vice President Nixon attempts to justify a pro-government stance that would interfere in local and state issues like education, even extending a willingness to pledge federal money for local salaries:

Now, why should there be any question about the federal government aiding teachers' salaries? Why did Senator Kennedy take that position then? Why do I take it now? We both took it then, and I take it now, for this reason: we want higher teachers' salaries. We need higher teachers' salaries.

Vice President Nixon makes special note of his agreeing with Senator Kennedy's roll call votes on using federal monies to raise teachers' salaries. In turn, Senator

Kennedy makes a special effort to pair his commitment to new government spending and programs with a balanced federal budget. Both of the latter two policy positions—federal (rather than local) spending on education and a balanced federal budget—would be described today as *extreme* and thus *polarizing* political issues, belonging to the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. Yet in 1960, both candidates staked moderate positions on these two policies that bridged the party aisle.

Contrast those positions with ones offered by presidential candidates in 2016. Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner at the time of the writing of this chapter, launched his Republican presidential bid not with a bipartisan commitment to education spending but with a unilateral promise to “build a great wall” separating the United States from its southern neighbor, Mexico.

I will build a great wall—and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me—and I’ll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words.

Even absent the flamboyant rhetoric on his wall-building prowess, a campaign promise for a physical wall illustrates a severe shift toward more ideological policy. And compare this statement with one by Democratic presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders, who has made a variety of campaign promises reminiscent of ones he gave in a *Washington Post* interview in 2009, promising to work toward a single-payer health care system.

If the goal of health care reform is to provide comprehensive, universal health care in a cost-effective way, the only honest approach is a single-payer approach.

Regardless of the eventual winner of the presidential election, neither of the preceding two proposals is likely to be enacted into law after the 2016 election unless one political party wins control of both the presidency and the full Congress. But these divergent promises indicate especially clearly the shift in ideology that has occurred over time—not just among the politicians who offer policy proposals but in the constituents who demand them and who vote in the primary elections for candidates who make them. And while we have used examples of moderate and polarized policy positions from presidential candidates because of their prominence, virtually every Democrat or Republican running for election to Congress today could be quoted for extreme—and therefore polarizing—ideological positions.

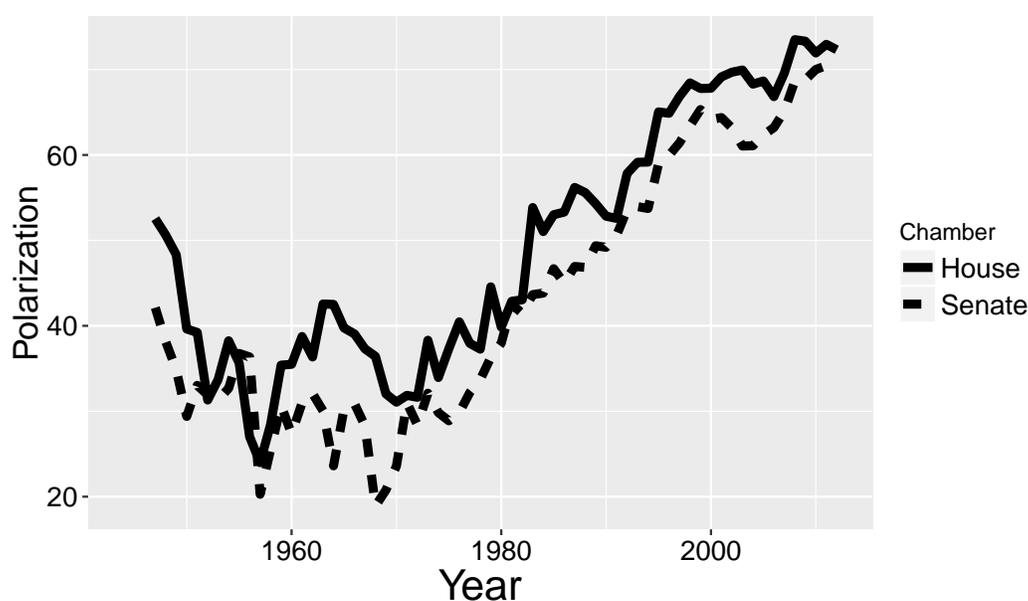
The puzzle this presents to contemporary *legislators* is how to represent constituency interests as the positions of the two major parties in Congress have grown more extreme *and* as the preferences of their respective Democratic or Republican constituents have also grown more extreme compared to the full constituency. The puzzle this presents to *scholars* is how a theory of representation can predict the character of representation that we should observe under conditions of higher or lower party polarization. The party polarization and issue complexity theory is uniquely advantaged to address the latter puzzle.

Polarization, Lawmaking, and Representation in Congress

To illustrate how our theory can help account for the character of representation under varying conditions of polarization, it is first useful to summarize how party polarization has varied across time. Such variations are well documented, and they indicate that the parties themselves have changed dramatically over time. The two major American parties were principally ideological and competing—that is, highly polarized—through much of the nineteenth century. Then, they entered a period of ideological overlap as a result of the failed laissez-faire governmental stance toward business that led to the Great Depression, the short-term decline of the Republican Party in the 1930s, and the dominance of the Democratic Party, which led the country out of the Great Depression and through World War II and the early postwar period.¹³

Figure 5-2 further offers a graphic representation of polarization in the U.S. Senate and the House from 1947 to 2012, for what might be called the modern Congress. The measures here are based on ratings of how liberal or conservative the roll call voting of each party was in a given chamber and year from the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) lobby group, adjusted so as to be comparable over time.¹⁴ The numbers on the y-axis of the figure indicate the absolute value of the difference between the means of the adjusted ADA ratings of each party in each house of Congress. Thus, higher scores indicate greater polarization in each chamber. As one example, Figure 5-2 shows that the measure of polarization for both chambers is in the range of seventy to seventy-five in the late 2000s. A score of one hundred would indicate that the roll call voting of the two parties was exactly opposite from each

Figure 5-2. Polarization by Chamber¹⁴



other in liberal versus conservative ideology. Scores in the mid-seventies, then, mean that overall roll call voting is very highly, if not exactly, opposite for the two parties.

Figure 5-2 also indicates that the parties were relatively less polarized in the period of the late 1950s and into the early 1970s. Indeed, polarization scores in the range of twenty to thirty in both chambers of Congress in the 1960s indicate that roll call voting was very much bipartisan. Polarization began to rise in the measures in Figure 5-2 in the late 1970s. The data in Figure 5-2, as well as other commonly used measures of polarization, also indicate that the parties became especially polarized in the late 1990s and continue to be so today. That is, their ideological centers of gravity are widely separated, and most members of each party are close to their respective centers in roll call voting.

The causes of the recent upsurge in polarization have been the subject of considerable investigation, but their effects are less well understood. Research by Soren Jordan and Barbara Sinclair, however, finds that polarization influences the lawmaking process in the House of Representatives in an intuitively logical way. In the circumstance of high polarization, the majority party especially controls the rule-making and roll-call-voting processes to ensure it gets legislation adopted that is compatible with its ideological center of gravity, thus leading to more ideologically extreme policy.¹⁵ As the parties become more polarized, the work of lawmaking also deviates from the classic textbook congressional process where, when bills appear on the floor, there is ample time for debate and amendments by members of both parties. Instead, under high polarization, much more of the lawmaking process occurs in the majority-party-dominated committees and particularly the committees with disproportionate influence over the rules. And the minority party has few opportunities to influence proposed legislation once it gets to the floor of the House.

If lawmaking becomes more ideologically extreme in periods of high polarization, then members of the majority party are voting together for bills that are ideologically extreme. And we know from even casual observation of day-to-day congressional politics that the minority party typically wages its own ideologically extreme counterefforts, even if they must mostly fail in the face of a unified majority. But how does the “landscape” of representation differ in such periods from that in eras of low polarization?

Our previous research did not confront the latter question. Yet our theory has logical implications for what representation should look like in different eras of polarization. These logical implications arise because the theory distinguishes models of representation with regard to the role of polarization on *individual* policy issues. That is, it recognizes that the major parties are highly polarized on responsible-party and elite-led issues but not on belief-sharing, delegate, or trustee ones. The complete elaboration of the theory also implies that in a period of high polarization, the full agenda of Congress must be especially heavily populated with responsible-party issues and less heavily populated with belief-sharing issues than in a period of low polarization. And the fact that the aggregate measure of

polarization in Figure 5-2 rises to a high level in contemporary times is independent confirmation of this logical implication of the theory.

While the theory itself does not explicitly address the following point, it is our intuition that issues that evoke belief-sharing, delegate, and trustee representation are likely to occur across all levels of polarization. The theory anticipates that issues that are easy for the public to understand and that crosscut the usual lines of party cleavage will evoke belief-sharing or delegate representation. Comparably, it anticipates that issues that cut across the lines of party cleavage and that are difficult to understand will lead to trustee representation. Our prior research uncovered issues of all of these types, even during the current period of high polarization, and we suspect they are likely to arise in notable numbers in any period.

In summary, the logic of our theory, our additional intuitions, and the general evidence in Figure 5-2 indicate that in any period, we should observe a diverse political agenda composed of issues that evoke all of the various models of representation. What should especially change as the parties polarize is the relative number of issues that fall into categories that can be broadly described as party defining or crosscutting.

But we can make a stronger case for the preceding argument based purely on theory, intuition, and very general evidence. To do so, we have assembled new empirical evidence about how representation on a subset of individual issues varied across time as polarization in Congress rose from the low period in the 1960s to the high period today. Recall that earlier we cited research on issue evolution, where the operating model of representation on a particular issue changed over time. The existing research on that topic assumes that the specific issues it considers—and the most important research of this sort has examined abortion, civil rights, and social welfare policy—have evolved in this way for idiosyncratic reasons. But the logic of our theory and the numerical implications of steeply rising or falling polarization imply that there are systematic processes at work that shape the model of representation on a host of issues simultaneously. We provide novel evidence on these systematic processes. This evidence also complements the preceding argument about how the theory logically anticipates patterns of representation under different levels of polarization.

To provide evidence on how party polarization changed on specific policy issues over time, we searched the Policy Tracker research tool in the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* online edition.¹⁶ The Policy Tracker provides all of the stories written by *Congressional Quarterly* reporters over almost seventy years about debates in Congress on a long list of specific policy issues. For this analysis, we collected information from this source on party polarization on roll call votes on three issues that have evoked responsible-party representation in contemporary times—abortion, climate change, and gun control policy—as well as four that were demonstrated in our previous research to evoke belief-sharing representation—military appropriations, the regulation of lurid acts and pornography, veterans' affairs, and social welfare for women.

For each of the preceding seven issues, we identified a sample of roll call votes from Policy Tracker stories from the 1960s through the first decade of the present century and grouped these roll call votes by decade. We then generated a measure of the polarization of the roll call votes on each issue in the House of Representatives in each decade, which we call a measure of *opposition*. If approximately equal proportions of both parties vote in the same direction, this measure would tend toward zero. If the two parties vote in large numbers in opposite directions, the measure would tend toward a large positive number, with a maximum value of two. Thus, larger scores on this measure indicate more party polarization on a given issue.

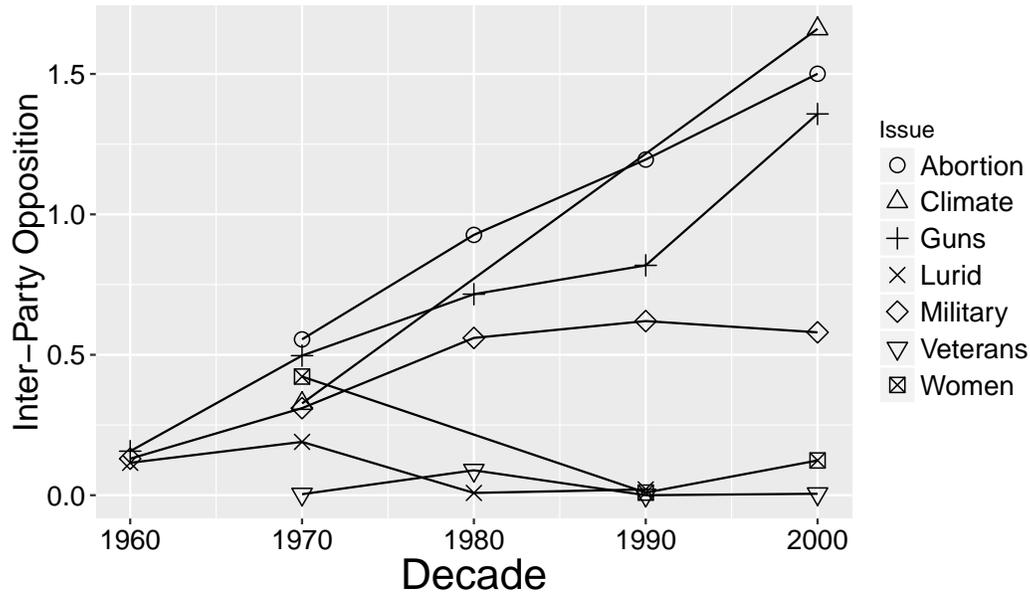
We present the opposition scores on these policy issues as an illustrative but not definitive characterization of how party polarization on them evolved as the aggregate policy agenda became increasingly polarized. Recall, however, the intuitions from our theory that we offered earlier that all of the models of representation will always appear regardless of the level of polarization while the balance among those models will shift toward responsible-party issues with increasing aggregate polarization. If those intuitions and the circumstances under which the theory anticipates individual models of representation will arise are both correct, then we should see evidence in the opposition scores for all of them.

Figure 5-3 presents the opposition scores from the 1960s through the 2000s for the seven issues, and the issue-specific patterns there conform to all of our expectations. The three issues that have recently been responsible-party ones demonstrate remarkable increases in polarization in roll call votes over the period of increasing aggregate polarization. That is, the evidence in Figure 5-3 indicates that those issues only modestly divided the parties during the period of low polarization of the 1960s and 1970s. But those issues evolved to where they now reflect very high partisan divisions.¹⁷

In contrast, the four issues that our prior research found to reflect considerable bipartisan consensus and usually belief-sharing representation were not remarkably changed from that characterization as aggregate polarization rose. Perhaps, not surprisingly, concern in Congress with pornography, veterans' affairs, and aid for women demonstrate low party polarization through the entire time series in Figure 5-3. Yet polarization on the often contentious subject of military appropriations has not risen to particularly high levels. Recent polarization scores in the range of fifty to sixty for that issue indicate that the modal roll call vote had substantial majority support from both parties in Congress.

In sum, the evidence in Figure 5-3 suggests that increasing aggregate polarization largely came about by dramatically enhancing the longtime, if incomplete, tendency for Democrats to vote relatively liberally and Republicans to vote relatively conservatively on a range of specific issues. Yet Figure 5-3 also confirms our earlier conclusion that crosscutting policy issues, many of which will demonstrate belief-sharing representation, also arise under all levels of polarization. Thus, the original evidence in Figure 5-3 supports and amplifies our earlier conclusions about how the landscape of representation will both, in part, stay the same and, in part, vary as levels of aggregate party polarization change.

Figure 5-3. House Opposition by Issue and Decade



Conclusion

Previous research on congressional politics has not produced a systematic explanation of how members of that body represent the preferences and interests of their constituents. For that reason, such research cannot explain whether constituencies are well or poorly represented, whether they are represented well under some conditions and not others, or whether representation will take different forms on different issues. We built upon the voluminous body of prior research, however, and crafted a theory that accounts systematically for how representation occurs. We adopted the *models of representation* typology from early research, which anticipated that belief-sharing, delegate, responsible-party, and trustee models would arise on different individual issues but which itself could not predict when and why those different models would arise in particular instances. Our *party polarization and issue complexity theory* offers explanations for both when and why these models individually arise. For that reason, it can be labeled a *unified theory* in that it accounts for all of the alternative models of representation conventionally identified in scientific research.

One could also conclude that the different models of representation arise as members of Congress make rational decisions about how to vote on proposed legislation. And some of their decisions and the conditions under which they arise produce representation that we believe would be widely endorsed. When constituencies at large and legislators themselves share policy preferences, the *belief-sharing* model will arise. At least in many instances when constituencies have very

strong and widely held preferences that legislators do not share, they will bow to those constituency preferences and provide *delegate* representation.

When members of Congress have no clear policy “instructions” from their national party or their constituency, they make policy decisions based on their own judgment and thus provide *trustee* representation. Given the conditions under which such representation generally arises, however, it is difficult to be critical of such behavior. Indeed, Americans have often accepted that they must defer to the wisdom of their elected representatives on some issues, especially ones of this sort.¹⁸ Finally, when legislators, their copartisans in the Congress, and their copartisans in their constituencies all share a preference on some policy issue, they will generally vote with that preference and provide *responsible-party* representation. Some observers may be especially uneasy about the normative implications of such representation, but we address those concerns momentarily.

We have also presented new evidence for how our theory helps anticipate patterns of representation under varying levels of party polarization. That evidence indicates the kinds of specific policy issues, especially in terms of which model of representation they conventionally evoke, that contribute to aggregate polarization and the kinds that do not. In general, issues that were at least moderately responsible-party ones before the dramatic increase in overall polarization of recent decades were ones where the legislators of the two major parties diverged even more dramatically over time. This phenomenon is compatible with other accounts of change in Congress in this period. But our evidence also demonstrates—and likely uniquely—that issues which conventionally induce belief-sharing, delegate, or trustee representation do not contribute to aggregate polarization. Further, the landscape of polarization continues to be populated with issues of the latter three types even in the current period of high polarization.

Finally, we return to an early observation in this chapter: that many political scientists and doubtless many members of the general public fear that high party polarization today is eroding the quality of congressional representation. Those fears, we argue, are not always based on a full consideration of the factual character of representation. We suspect that most of this concern is about the fact that responsible-party issues—for which legislators’ constituency copartisans get the best representation—are especially numerous today. Yet a series of additional observations might mitigate some of that concern.

Consider that a notable majority of Americans today claim a psychological preference for one of the two major parties. Gallup Poll data from early 2016 indicate that almost 90 percent of Americans identify either as strong partisans of one or the other major party, weak partisans of one of them, or as independents who lean to one of the parties (and who tend typically to vote like weak partisans).¹⁹ That is, most Americans especially identify with the major policy positions their preferred party distinctively holds, which would be, of course, on responsible-party issues. Thus, such individuals who are represented in Congress by legislators of their preferred party get good representation on the issues they evidently care especially about.

Further, the most politically attentive members of the general public also tend to be the most partisan. These individuals also especially benefit (through policy representation) from being copartisans of their member in Congress. Moreover, these individuals are strongly predisposed to reject policy compromise for partisan victory.²⁰ Instead, they prefer their member to hold out for stronger policy positions that better reflect the preferences of the party. Even if the average member of the public were to reject the partisanship of Congress, it would be rational for legislators to maintain high levels of partisanship if the most attentive voters preferred this strategy. And we reiterate, our theory predicts unique benefits for these copartisan identifiers as more issues become party defining.

If there is reason to be concerned about high party polarization today, in our view, it is because neither party has been able to gain full control of the presidency and Congress long enough to translate its policy agenda into law. A policy achievement of that sort would provide a clear basis for public assessment, in subsequent elections, of that agenda and of its alternatives. In the current state of what has been called policy gridlock, however, where no party can succeed with its agenda, partisans of all stripes have reason to be discontented, although not necessarily with the representation they get from their own members of Congress.

Notes

¹Kim Quaile Hill, Soren Jordan, and Patricia A. Hurley, *Representation in Congress: A Unified Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, "Constituency Representation in Congress," *American Political Science Review* 57 (1963): 455-6.

³A variety of other scholars have proposed that different policy issues might stimulate different patterns of lawmaking and perhaps representation. The most noted of such works are Aage R. Clausen, *How Congressmen Decide: A Policy Focus* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), and John S. Lapinski, *The Substance of Representation: Congress, American Political Development, and Lawmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). But such work has not attracted much attention from other scholars, perhaps because it has not produced systematic theory based on the assumption that different policy issues evoke different kinds of representation.

⁴Evidence that members of Congress and the political elite generally are more ideologically extreme than the constituencies of members and the general public predates the current period of high party polarization, as demonstrated in Christopher H. Achen, "Measuring Representation," *American Journal of Political Science* 22 (1978): 475-510, and in Herbert McClosky, Paul J. Hoffman, and Rosemary O'Hara, "Issue Conflict and Consensus Among Party Leaders and Followers," *American Political Science Review* 54 (1960): 406-27. Recent research like that of Joseph Bafumi and Michael C. Herron, "Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress," *American Political Science Review* 104 (2010): 519-42, provides contemporary evidence for how members of Congress are more ideologically extreme than their constituencies. However, Robert S. Erikson and Gerald C. Wright, "Voters, Candidates, and Issues in Congressional Elections, in *Congress Reconsidered*, 8th ed., ed. Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2005), 97-98, provide evidence from public survey data that suggests this is not necessarily the case. Further, a number of studies, such as that of James Adams, Benjamin G. Bishin, and Jay K. Dow, "Representation in Congressional Campaigns: Evidence for Discounting/Directional Voting in U.S. Senate Elections," *Journal of Politics* 66 (2004): 348-73, indicate voters generally prefer election candidates who are more ideologically extreme than they are.

⁵On the evolution of abortion policy in terms relevant to which model of representation was operating for it at different historical times, see Greg D. Adams, "Abortion: Evidence of an Issue Evolution," *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (1997): 718-37. For the evolution of civil rights policy, see Edward G. Carmines

and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). For social welfare policy, see Patricia A. Hurley and Kim Quaile Hill, “Beyond the Demand-Input Model: A Theory of Representational Linkages,” *Journal of Politics* 65 (2003): 304-26.

⁶Hill, Jordan, and Hurley, *Representation in Congress*, 43-44.

⁷For recent evidence that legislators’ personal values can lead to trustee roll call voting see, Barry C. Burden, *Personal Roots of Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), and Elizabeth Anne Oldmixon, *Uncompromising Positions: God, Sex, and the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005). For recent evidence for trustee roll call voting in the interest of good public policy, see Edward L. Lascher Jr., Steven Kelman, and Thomas J. Kane, “Policy Views, Constituency Pressure, and Congressional Action on Flag Burning,” *Public Choice* 76 (1993): 79-102, and John A. Hird, “The Political Economy of Pork: Project Selection at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers,” *American Political Science Review* 85 (1991): 429-56.

⁸Lewis Anthony Dexter, “The Representative and His District,” *Human Organization* 16, no. 1 (1957): 2-13.

⁹Donald R. Matthews, *U.S. Senators and Their World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 231, note 26. Matthews recognizes that this harmony may not extend to positions on all policy issues, but he argues it is associated with especially important political values and preferences in senators’ home states.

¹⁰The contrast between what we have called apple pie and motherhood issues and gun control suggests another reason why systematic theory is valuable. Apple pie issues produce comparable belief-sharing representation *across* legislative constituencies. But gun control likely produces belief-sharing representation in some constituencies and responsible-party representation in others. A conventional empirical analysis of representation might discover instances of the former sort, but a nuanced theory of representation would help one uncover both sorts.

¹¹Richard F. Fenno Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 59, refers to such behavior as an attempt by a legislator to earn the trust of his or her constituents by demonstrating that, “You can trust me because we are like one another.” Thus, shared political values anticipated by the belief-sharing model of representation can be a foundation for trust between constituents and legislators.

¹²Two other policy cases—campaign finance reform in the late 1990s and gun control policy in the 2000s—did not have sufficiently clear combinations of issue easiness and party polarization scores to make confident predictions for the model of representation they should reflect. In addition, we were unable to discover cases of delegate or party-led representation for which data to test our predictions were available.

¹³For more detailed evidence on the evolution of polarization in Congress, see Richard Fleisher and John R. Bond, “The Shrinking Middle in the US Congress,” *British Journal of Political Science* 34 (2004): 429-51; Soren Jordan, Clayton McLaughlin Webb, and B. Dan Wood, “The President, Polarization, and the Party Platforms, 1944-2012,” *The Forum* 12 (2013): 169-89; B. Dan Wood and Soren Jordan. “Electoral Polarization: Definition, Measurement, and Evaluation,” paper delivered at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Seattle, September 4-6, 2011.

¹⁴The original polarization scores for the House and the Senate come from Tim Groseclose, Steven D. Levitt, and James M. Snyder Jr., “Comparing Interest Group Scores Across Time and Chambers: Adjusted ADA Scores for the U.S. Congress,” *American Political Science Review* 93 (1999): 33-50. The time series was updated to 2007 by Sarah Anderson and Philip Habel, “Revisiting Adjusted ADA Scores for the U.S. Congress, 1947-2007,” *Political Analysis* 17 (2009): 83-88, and to 2012 by Soren Jordan.

¹⁵Soren Jordan, “Polarization and Lawmaking Over Time: A Detailed Test of Conditional Party Government,” paper delivered at the Conference on Parties and Polarization in American Government, College Station, TX, April 23-24, 2014; Barbara Sinclair, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Procedures in the U.S. Congress* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2000).

¹⁶The *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* online Policy Tracker is available at <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/toc.php?mode=cqalmanac-policy>.

¹⁷Comparable analyses for the Senate, not reported for limitations of space, indicate over-time patterns of representation compatible with those for the House.

¹⁸Thomas E. Cronin, *Direct Democracy: The Politics of Initiative, Referendum, and Recall* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1-9.

¹⁹These data were retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx> on March 14, 2016.

²⁰Laurel Harbridge and Neil Malhotra, "Electoral Incentives and Partisan Conflict in Congress: Evidence From Survey Experiments," *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (2011): 494-510.