Journal of Historical Political Economy, 2021, 1: 183–214

Polarization Lost: Exploring the Decline of Ideological Voting in Congress after the Gilded Age

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ABSTRACT

We examine the decline in congressional polarization that occurred during the 1920s, as party differences narrowed relative to the high levels that characterized the turn of the twentieth century — a period that has, until recently, been regarded as the high-water mark of partisan polarization in American politics. We note two sets of findings. First, replacement seems to have driven depolarization to a larger extent than conversion, but with different patterns among Republicans and Democrats. Second, both qualitative and roll call evidence suggests that agricultural and tariff policies were key early areas of interparty cooperation, providing important opportunities for cross-party and cross-regional coalitions (like the Farm Bloc and the Progressive Coalition) to form before the Conservative Coalition emerged in the late-1930s.

Keywords: Ideological voting; polarization; Congress; 1920s

We live in a polarized political age, where support for extreme political views has increased relative to support for moderate ones (McCarty, 2019). This polarization is notable because it comes after a long period in the middle of the 20th century when bipartisan, and presumably more centrist, lawmaking

*We thank Nicholas Napolio for extensive help with the data.

ISSN 2693-9290; DOI 10.1561/115.00000009

was common, despite the fact that the parties stood poles apart on many important issues.

Most students of politics are aware that this is not the only polarized period of American national politics. The roll call record reveals that the Gilded Age was another period when Democrats and Republicans rarely voted together (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007). It was also a period when "bloody shirt" rhetoric stoked popular animosities that supported the election of politicians who had little use for the other party. Before then, the story leading to the Civil War reveals a severe form of polarization, at both the popular and elite levels, which in the end led to bloody rebellion (Freeman, 2018).

That there are long ebbs and flows in the levels of congressional polarization naturally leads to questions about how politics transitions from one state to the other. This article is an effort to understand one such transition, from the turn of the 20th century, which previously has been regarded as the high-water-mark of partisan polarization in American politics, to the late 1930s, when the Conservative Coalition emerged as the focal point of a long-term (if informal) alliance of Republicans and southern Democrats. Our primary focus is at the beginning of that transition, in the 1920s, when partisan regularity was still the norm.[1] By then, the rift in the Republican Party — wherein progressives faced off against establishment leaders — had already gone public, but it had yet to result in predictable bipartisan coalitions within Congress.

This article proceeds as follows. In the following section, we introduce the topic by discussing broad patterns of roll call voting behavior during this period. We show that the 1920s are properly understood as the starting point of the long period of bipartisan lawmaking, culminating in the pivotal role played by the Conservative Coalition for a generation. We also provide an historical overview of two policy areas around which bipartisan coalitions began to form, farm policy and tariff policy.

In the subsequent section, we provide a theoretical discussion of the linkage between preferences and roll call voting behavior, with an eye toward understanding the factors that lead to variation in the degree to which roll call voting results can be deemed more-or-less "polarized." The purpose of this section is to provide some theoretical clarity to the search for what led to the decline of polarized voting patterns during this period.

In the penultimate section, we briefly explore roll call voting patterns in three domains. First, we examine the voting records of new members and incumbents to determine whether replacement or conversion (or a combination of both) seems to be driving depolarization. Second, we explore voting patterns on agriculture/farm issues. Third, we examine voting on tariff issues. Finally, in the last section, we conclude by summarizing our results, discussing how

[1]Few studies explore the decline in polarization in the early 20th century. A recent popular press book by Putnam and Garrett (2020) does so by relying upon an early version of this paper as one major source.

this research might continue to develop in the future, and reflecting on the contemporary era of polarization.

Introduction

The study of polarization is ubiquitous in the contemporary American politics literature. Research investigating ideological divisions between Republicans and Democrats at the mass and elite levels has increased substantially in recent years, to the point of becoming veritable cottage industries. While scholars disagree whether ordinary citizens are deeply divided by party (Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina *et al.*, 2010; Mason, 2018), all agree that congressional polarization exists — and is growing.[2] Indeed, measures constructed using the gold-standard metric, NOMINATE scores (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007), suggest that polarization in both the House and Senate is at an all-time high in American history.

General Patterns of Polarization

In analyzing congressional polarization across time, the typical approach has been to measure how far apart the median or mean members of the two parties are by Congress and by chamber, usually on the first DW-NOMINATE dimension (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007). The temporal scope of such analyses has been the post-Reconstruction period. Across that time-span, as illustrated in Figure 1, the party-difference portrait is bi-modal.[3] A high level of polarization was present at the turn of the 20th century, with the high-water mark (especially in the House) coinciding with the strong party period (led by the Republican speakerships of Thomas Reed and Joseph Cannon) between 1890 and 1910. A high level of polarization also exists today, and continues to grow, with both the House and Senate measures in recent Congresses surpassing the peaks of the previous century.

The current high levels of congressional polarization are often compared to the period of the mid-20th century, when polarization was considerably lower and party differences were flat for decades. This was a period that saw considerable bipartisanship, as southern Democrats and Republicans often

[2]As the existence of congressional polarization is taken as a given at this point, scholars have focused instead on external and internal sources of the polarization as well as the consequences. See McCarty (2019) for a summary.

[3]Data used to create this figure — and all succeeding figures — are from Jeffrey B. Lewis, Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnet. 2021. *Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database.* https://voteview.com/. Accessed February 28.

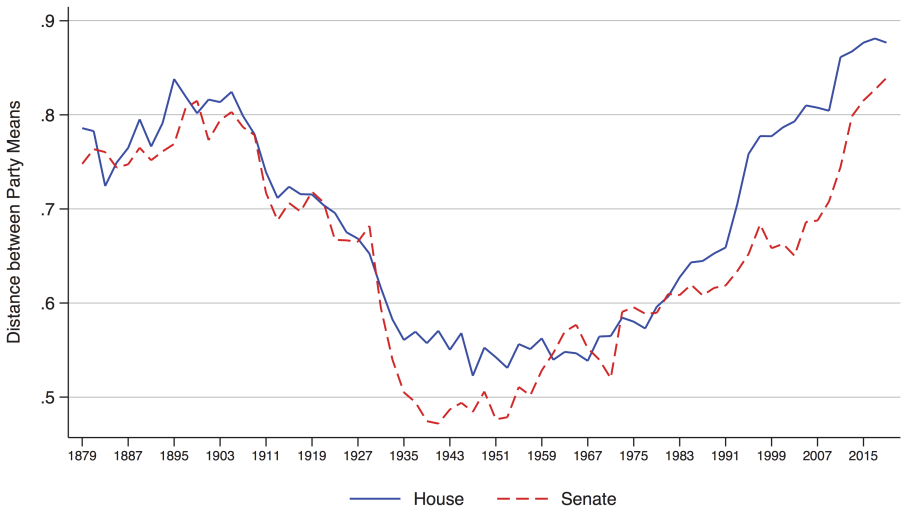


Figure 1: Party polarization, 1879–2021 distance between the parties, first dimension. *Note*: Years on the x-axis indicate the opening year of a given Congress. So, e.g., 1879 represents the opening year of the 46th Congress (1879–1881).

voted together on a range of issues on the House and Senate floors.[4] This "Conservative Coalition," which traces its origins to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's failed Court-packing initiative in 1937, successfully limited the range and scope of New Deal social programs. It remained an important force in congressional politics through the mid-1980s, when conservative southern Democrats finally disappeared amid a popular realignment, to be replaced by a small number of liberal/moderate Democrats and a larger number of conservative Republicans.[5]

The rise of the Conservative Coalition as an empirical regularity is correlated almost precisely with levels of roll call polarization graphed in Figure 1, particularly in the House. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which reports the percentage of roll call votes in which majorities of Republicans and southern Democrats voted against a majority of non-southern Democrats in both the

[4]For an argument and evidence that the Conservative Coalition also acted as a procedural coalition during these years, by screening out issues that could have rolled its membership, see Jenkins and Monroe (2014).

[5]A focus on the demise of archetypical southern Democrats in favor of a mix of "national" Democrats and conservative Republicans obscures the parallel demise of northern liberal Republicans in favor of moderate-to-liberal Democrats. Here, we emphasize the southern half of the sorting story, because the Conservative Coalition was by far the more visible, coherent, and consequential inter-party voting alliance. For the northern half of the sorting story, see Reiter and Stonecash (2011).

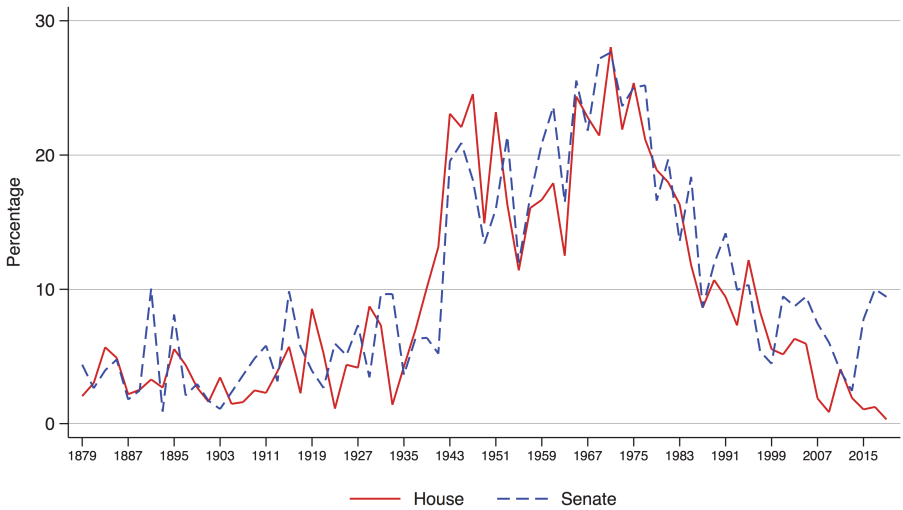


Figure 2: Appearance of the conservative coalition, 1879–2021. *Note*: Years on the x-axis indicate the opening year of a given Congress. So, e.g., 1879 represents the opening year of the 46th Congress (1879–1881).

House and Senate. The correlation between the House polarization measure in Figure 1 and the percentage of all roll call votes in the House that provoked an appearance of the Conservative Coalition is −0.79; for the Senate, it is −0.65.

The congressional bipartisanship underlying the Conservative Coalition era is well known. Many look back fondly on that era as one of moderation, with members routinely eschewing partisanship and working across the aisle. Of course, much of that "moderation" took the form of opposing or limiting civil rights and organized labor initiatives.

What is less well known is how Congress got to the bipartisanship, and lower levels of polarization, of that era. As Figure 1 illustrates, a significant and steep decline in polarization occurred during the 1920s (up through the mid-1930s).[6] This is a decade before the Conservative Coalition first took center stage. Little has been written about these years, and what underlay the reduction in party differences. But, in fact, a different form of bipartisanship took hold during these years, as different constellations of forces joined to erode the strong and cohesive partisanship that had operated during the previous several decades.

[6] An earlier drop in the 1910s is often attributed to the pushback against the strong-arm tactics of the Republican leadership — notably the stripping of many of the powers of Speaker Joseph Cannon (R-IL) — and the decentralization of authority to committees. See Jenkins (2011).

One way to uncover evidence of this bipartisanship, in the aggregate, is to break down the polarization results in Figure 1 into partisan and regional components. This is done in Figures 3 and 4, which provide the mean positions of Republicans and Democrats (along with subgroupings of southerners and northerners) on the first DW-NOMINATE dimension for the House and Senate. Several trends are clear from these plots. First, the mean Republican position in both chambers shifted leftward (in a liberal direction) during the 1920s (into the mid-1930s). This shift was more gradual in the House than in the Senate. Second, the mean Democratic position in the House shifted rightward (in a conservative direction) during the 1920s (into the mid-1930s), and this shift was driven entirely by southern Democrats. Indeed, the mean southern Democratic position leapfrogged the mean northern Democratic position during these years; southern Democrats started the period on the far left and moved to the right of the northern Democrats (whose mean position stayed flat during this period).

The pattern in the Senate was different, as both northern and southern Democrats moved to the right (in a conservative direction) during these years, which suggests a general movement toward bipartisanship in the Senate quite apart from the rise of the Conservative Coalition.

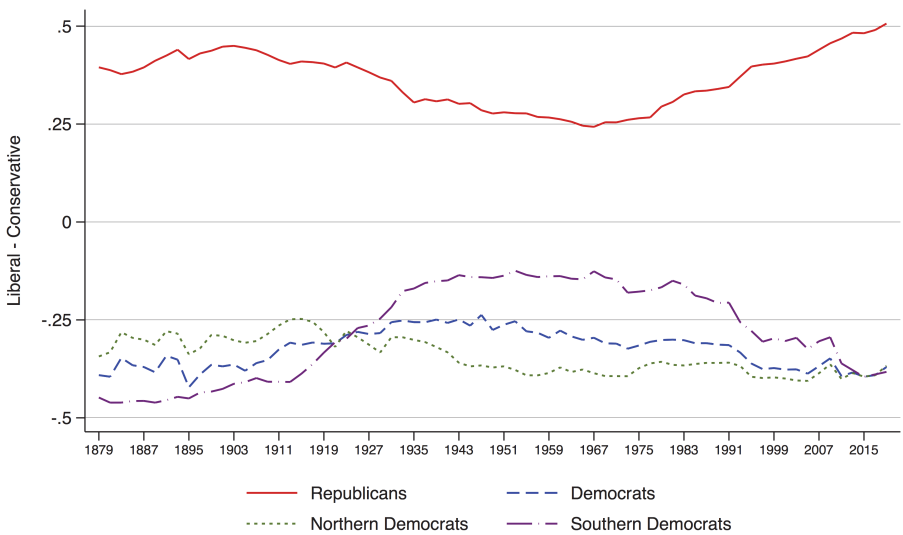


Figure 3: House of Representatives, 1879–2021. Party means on the Liberal–Conservative (first) dimension. *Note*: Years on the x-axis indicate the opening year of a given Congress. So, e.g., 1879 represents the opening year of the 46th Congress (1879–1881).

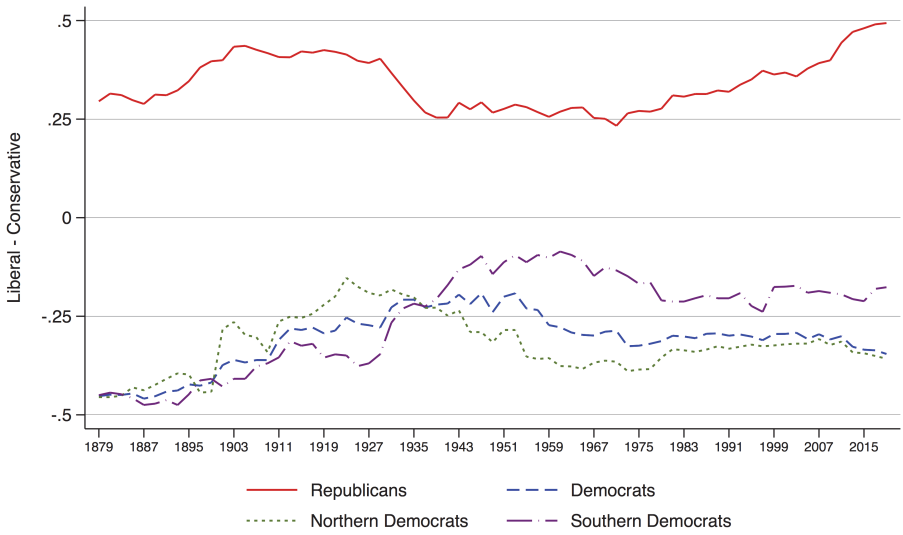


Figure 4: Senate, 1879–2021. Party means on the Liberal–Conservative (first) dimension. *Note*: Years on the x-axis indicate the opening year of a given Congress. So, e.g., 1879 represents the opening year of the 46th Congress (1879–1881).

The convergence between Republicans and Democrats during the 1920s (into the mid-1930s) was a function of cross-party voting by different factions on a range of issues. These moves toward bipartisanship preceded the more well-known bipartisan behavior at the heart of the Conservative Coalition era. Exploring this rise in bipartisanship helps frame the emergence of the Conservative Coalition in the late-1930s and usefully adds to and expands the bipartisan narrative that emerged in the post-World War I era.

Sources of bipartisanship in the 1920s took three forms, all overlapping to some extent: (1) The Farm Bloc, a formal, bipartisan group of members from agricultural constituencies that emerged in the 67th Congress (1921–1923) and wielded legislative agenda power; (2) The Progressive Caucus, which gained traction from the 1922 midterm elections (and a popular rebuke of Old Guard Republicanism) and remained a force in congressional politics though the end of decade; and (3) informal "farm bloc" coordination on tariff votes in the mid-to-late 1920s, most of which had important agricultural components.

Agriculture and the Shaping of Bipartisan Blocs

The Farm Bloc was a cross-party success story in Congress, albeit a fleeting one. After World War I, agricultural interest groups, led by the Farm Bureau, built up their lobbying organizations in Washington. As a result, intense pressure

was placed on members of Congress from farming districts, at a time when the country was entering the Depression of 1920–1921 (see Grant, 2014). The result was an organized caucus, the bipartisan Farm Bloc, whose membership was drawn primarily from the Middle West, with House and Senate leaders coming from Iowa. The Farm Bloc developed an issue agenda and held regular information sessions for members — and most importantly, exercised agenda control in Congress.

The Farm Bloc had its greatest success in June 1921, near the end of the first session of the 67th Congress, when Senate Republicans attempted to adjourn while the body waited for the House to pass a tariff bill. Bloc members, both Republicans and Democrats, refused to support adjournment until the Senate dealt with a half-dozen issues that the Bloc considered important (Hansen, 1991). After some back-and-forth between Bloc leaders and the GOP establishment, a deal was cut, whereby six agricultural appropriations would be passed and then adjournment agreed upon. In effect, during this legislative interchange, the Bloc exercised both negative and positive agenda control — first, preventing adjournment, and then only supporting it when a set of issues the Bloc cared about were allowed on the agenda and settled on the floor.

The adjournment controversy proved to be the Farm Bloc's high-water mark. The Bloc continued to operate in the second session of the 67th Congress, but produced no additional legislative victories of note. Part of this related to its achievements in the first session; the Bloc had already satisfied most of what it had on its legislative agenda, and thus was a victim of its own success. Another part of the Bloc's decline related to the development of the broader political context in the country (Robertson, 1983). The 1922 midterms saw the Republican establishment suffer a series of defeats, and while agrarian unrest was certainly a factor in the electoral backlash, "rather than a victory for farmers . . . the elections were interpreted as a victory for progressives over the GOP old guard" (Hansen, 1991, p. 36). Indeed, a number of Farm Bloc representatives also lost their elections, alongside the Old Guard members. But, more generally, the backlash against the GOP establishment went beyond agricultural issues, and also involved anti-railroad, pro-labor, anti-isolationist, anti-prohibition, pro-regulation, and pro-tariff-reform sentiments, among others. Stated simply, a strong progressive revival had "more or less absorbed the agricultural bloc" (Hansen, 1991, p. 37).

At the heart of this progressive revival was a bipartisan Progressive Coalition in Congress. Like the Farm Bloc, this Coalition had strong roots in the Midwest, but it was broader, with strong allies in the West (especially the Pacific Northwest) and some advocates in the South (Olssen, 1970). Tied together through general support for "reform," which carried across a variety of political-economic issues, the Progressive Coalition had more staying power

than the Farm Bloc. Led by Senators Robert La Follette (R-WI) and George Norris (R-NE), the Progressive Coalition fought the traditionalism of the GOP Old Guard on the floor — but, more importantly, acted as a procedural coalition as well. As Olssen (1980, p. 248) notes, the Coalition "usually met before [a] session of Congress, enjoyed the services of a research bureau which also served as a secretariat, and tried to achieve and maintain unity not only on questions of policy but also on strategy and tactics." Unlike the Farm Bloc, which had a set of finite and sector-specific issues to pursue, the Progressive Coalition's goals were broader, and manifested an ongoing concern. "The persistence of such a group," according to Olssen (1980, p. 248), "reflected the fact that a number of 'progressive' politicians wanted a substantial increase in federal power to grapple with economic problems and perceived their political debts and loyalties in a similar manner." As a result, the Progressive Coalition was a force — and a thorn in the side of traditional two-party politics — through the early-1930s.

In the wake of the Farm Bloc and during the era of the Progressive Coalition, agricultural issues once again became a major issue in the mid-to-late 1920s. This was due in large part to the lingering effects of the Depression of 1920–1921; while most economic sectors regained their footing relatively quickly, the agricultural sector, especially in the Middle West, would be mired in malaise for the remainder of the decade (Irwin, 2011). Calls would eventually ring out for "equality for agriculture," as farm advocates would argue that federal support was biased toward manufacturing and industrial interests (in the construction of semi-regular tariff legislation) and failed to protect farming interests against swings in international agricultural prices. As a result, various agricultural relief plans were floated, with the most successful being the McNary–Haugen Farm Relief Act. Sponsored by Sen. Charles McNary (R-OR) and Rep. Gilbert Haugen (R-IA), the Act combined a domestic price support with an export subsidy — the federal government would purchase American agricultural products (and thereby increase demand and raise the domestic price) and sell any surpluses overseas (at the world price). Farmers would cover the difference between the domestic and world prices through an "equalization fee" (or tax), which would be partially passed on to domestic consumers in the form of higher U.S. food prices (Saloutos and Hicks, 1951). McNary–Haugen was debated in 1924 and 1926, before passing in both chambers in 1927 and 1928, thanks to increased Southern support, following an expansion of the price-support coverage to cotton. But, on both occasions, the legislation was vetoed by President Calvin Coolidge, who opposed any agricultural subsidies or price-fixing initiatives.

While Midwestern GOP progressives and southern Democrats joined in supporting McNary–Haugen, a new Farm Bloc did not emerge. Both groups recognized that they could gain from collaborating, but their interests were

often different.[7] Also, southern Democrats, in keeping with their general antipathy toward labor movements, were suspicious of farm groups and their various pressures and demands. Instead, agricultural collaboration would be piecemeal and emerge on the House and Senate floors when the conditions were right, but would *not* entail advanced organizational planning and other formal procedures or institutions. As a result, Hansen (1991, p. 31 n 14) refers to common-interest agricultural voting in the late-1920s and early-1930s as evidence of a "farm bloc" rather than a "Farm Bloc."

With price supports and subsidies stymied, Midwestern GOP progressives sought a different route for relief. Without sufficient support to ratchet down import tariffs on manufactured goods, as a way to increase a domestic farmer's purchasing power, the only remaining alternative was to fight for higher tariffs on agricultural products. As a result, Midwestern progressives made a push for a new tariff revision (with the last such revision occurring in 1922, with the protectionist Fordney–McCumber Tariff), which would bring agricultural interests on par with manufacturing interests. Old Guard Republicans agreed to go along, and following Republican Herbert Hoover's smashing defeat of Democrat Al Smith in the 1928 presidential election, tariff revision in Congress began in earnest.

Trouble began when the goal of "tariff equality" eroded in House committee. While tariff rates on agricultural products were indeed raised, bill writers on Ways and Means faced pressure from a variety of interests, which resulted in tariff rates on a range of manufactured goods also being raised. Equality was restored a bit in the Senate, where GOP progressives and southern Democrats were more pivotal, but more importantly this "farm bloc" joined to (a) include a debenture (or export subsidy) in the bill, to satisfy farming interests that sold most of their products overseas, and (b) strip a flexible trade provision in the bill, which granted the president the ex post ability to adjust tariff levels as the need arose. While the Old Guard GOP was seemingly on the ropes, the Republican establishment pulled together and undid the farm bloc changes in conference, much to the dismay of George Norris and other progressive leaders. While the farm bloc largely opposed the elimination of the debenture and restoration of the flexible trade provision in the final bill, enough Democratic votes were bought (via increases in commodity rates in Louisiana, Florida, and Wyoming) to secure passage in June of 1930 (Irwin, 2011). The Smoot–Hawley Tariff, named after sponsors Sen. Reed Smoot (R-UT) and Rep. Willis Hawley

[7]Southern Democrats, for example, had little interest in McNary–Haugen when it was initially debated in the mid-1920s. Cotton prices, unlike midwestern corn prices, remained strong during those years. Thus, southerners were not receptive to price stabilization arguments. Only when cotton prices took a nosedive in 1926 did they begin to warm to progressive appeals — and only came on board McNary–Haugen when they had secured a three-year waiver on the equalization fee (Hansen, 1991).

(R-OR), would raise tariff rates to record levels and generate tariff retaliation from a number of America's trading partners.

More important for purposes of our argument here, however, the political circumstances of the late-1920s and early-1930s indicated that an interest confluence between Midwestern GOP progressives and southern Democrats was developing. Southerners increasingly lost their fear and hostility toward farm groups, as cotton prices dropped and advice and assistance became more valuable, and the farm lobby consolidated its bipartisan influence (Hansen, 1991). This was fortuitous timing for an incoming liberal president, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal would benefit from such consolidation, and relief in the form of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) would be provided to suffering farmers. As a result, the bipartisanship of the "farm bloc" would give way, with Midwestern progressivism and the Republican Party going their separate ways, and the alliance partners would become an important Democratic component of the New Deal Coalition.

Matching Politics to Roll Calls

In the previous section, we highlighted some important ways in which the political response to shifting economic realities in the 1920s (which mostly focused on the crisis in agriculture) gave rise to opportunities for blocs of members to ignore party and to build coalitions structured around the particular needs of constituents. As the previous summary of Farm Bloc (and farm bloc) politics suggests, it is possible to examine specific roll call votes, or particular strategic moves, for evidence of cross-party cooperation. However, claims about the rise and fall of polarization are usually made in sweeping terms, abstracting from the deal making of particular cases, in favor of discerning larger trends. Thus, if we are to connect episodes like the rise of the Farm Bloc to a secular trend away from polarization, it would be nice to demonstrate changes in roll call patterns more generally.

As a bridge between the previous section and the next, in which we explore broad patterns of roll call voting in the realms of farm and tariff policy, here we provide some thoughts about the process by which political differences between legislators get translated into roll call-based measures of partisan polarization.

An enduring line of legislative research seeks to match-up richly nuanced accounts of legislative politics with more general, abstract trends in legislative politics. Thus, for instance, narratives about legislative struggles over civil rights legislation (e.g., Sundquist, 1968) and ideographic studies of the Conservative Coalition (Manley, 1973) exist alongside roll call analysis that identifies a racial dimension to congressional roll call voting in the mid-20th century (and perhaps most of American political history) that pervades much of legislative behavior, even in those cases where the rich narratives about legislative struggles have not been developed.

Our goal is to ultimately match up various narratives that have highlighted cross-party coalitions in the first third of the 20th century with the roll call record during the same period. Is it possible to abstract the well-known stories of factional politics during this period — the Progressive revolt, the rise of the farm bloc, pork barreling with the tariff, etc. — into general patterns of roll call behavior that can (1) serve as an umbrella over these stories, (2) provide a connection to other studies, such as the later reaction to FDR's court-packing plan, and (3) help illuminate the eclipsing of a period of American politics characterized by partisan polarization in favor of a new period characterized by bipartisanship?

Polarization without Parties

To help make the transition to roll call analysis, this section sets out some basic premises about roll call behavior, and the degree to which roll call behavior can illuminate ideological polarization in Congress.

Our starting point is with a common view, which is that roll call behavior arises primarily from members' preferences (Krehbiel, 2000), as captured by spatially by ideal points. These preferences have two sources: (1) ideology, which can be defined as a system of *constraints* that tie together a multitude of political questions ranging across issue domains (Gerring, 1997), and (2) interests,[8] which generally arise from the *geographically* determined settings that distinctly ground legislators to the districts or states that elect them.

This starting point makes no mention of political parties (Krehbiel, 1993), and helps us to specify a type of "pure" polarization that arises because of systems of thought (ideology) and particular district needs (interests). As generally conceived, interests are theoretically orthogonal to ideology; polarization in this context is an attribute of the ideological dimension.[9]

At this point, it would be helpful to define what polarization means in this context. A common view is that polarization is primarily a characteristic of

[8]In the interest of keeping the terminology succinct, we call this second factor "interests," though to be more precise, it is a special type: *particularistic* interests, which are the driver of Mayhewian "credit claiming" and Fennoesque reelection-seeking (Fenno, 1973; Mayhew, 1974).

[9]If we think about interests as being distinct to each district, then we have an $n + 1$ dimensional issue space to consider, where $n =$ the number of legislators (so, one dimension per member) and the $+1$ referring to ideology. If we normalize each of the n dimensions to (0,1), it is usually convenient to place all members but one at 0 and the legislator/district in question at 1, along the dimension pertaining to that legislator/district. Doing so encourages thinking about the non-ideological dimension in terms of a bidding game for the "cheapest" majority coalition possible (Groseclose and Snyder, Jr., 1996; Snyder, 1991). Of course, it is also possible, and convenient, to reduce the number of non-ideological dimensions to some number less than n, and think in terms of blocs of legislators who have particularistic interests that are similar enough that they can be thought of as unified actors, such as representatives with large numbers of constituents who are farmers, laborers, etc. In this paper, we lean toward this latter view of the non-ideological dimension(s) of ideal points.

the ideological dimension of preferences. In one dimension, polarization can be thought of as referencing "how far apart" members are from one another. This suggests that one measure of polarization is simply the variance of ideal points along the ideological dimension. Considering two time periods, t_1 and t_2, we would say that members are more polarized at t_2 if the variance of ideal points along the ideological dimension at t_2 is greater than the variance at t_1 (i.e., $\sigma^2_{i,t_2} > \sigma^2_{i,t_1}$).

However, this definition seems to be missing something. The term "polarization" is used, rather than terms like "variance" or "heterogeneity," because "polarization" has the connotation of being pulled to extremes, in the same way that magnets pull their attractive energy to the extremes. Thus, while greater variance may be one measure of greater polarization, polarization also needs a measure of the shape of the ideological distribution, and in particular, whether it is bimodal. This is the intuition behind measuring polarization in terms of the absolute difference between the average DW-NOMINATE scores of the two parties; this measure treats the party averages as the poles.

If we simply follow a Downsian electoral model, then we would expect that, over time, if the ideological distribution of a legislature becomes more polarized, it is because districts have become more polarized, or at least the median voters of districts.

As reviewed in the "Introduction," there is some disagreement about whether the congressional polarization that has become more evident in recent years has been accompanied by an increase in mass polarization.[10] However, even if we grant that the American electorate has become more polarized over the past decade, it is unlikely that mass polarization has been as rapid as that observed in Congress. And, even if the rise of mass polarization has been as rapid as congressional polarization, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that the level of polarization is greater for members of Congress than for the mass public. For this reason, political scientists have spent a lot of time examining how the mapping from a less-polarized electorate to a more-polarized Congress occurs.

There is one dynamic of roll call behavior that is virtually guaranteed to make members of Congress appear more ideologically polarized than either their constituents or their own preferences: the distribution of cut points among the set of items brought to a roll call vote (Snyder, 1992). If the cut points of roll call votes tend to over-represent the center of the ideological space (compared to the cut points of all votes, including those that pass without a roll call vote), then the measures of ideology based on roll call voting will

[10]Because our empirical interests are historical, we note that the question of whether voters in earlier periods were ideologically polarized in a meaningful way is an open one — and must be addressed if the question of polarization is to be fit into a comprehensive understanding of American political development.

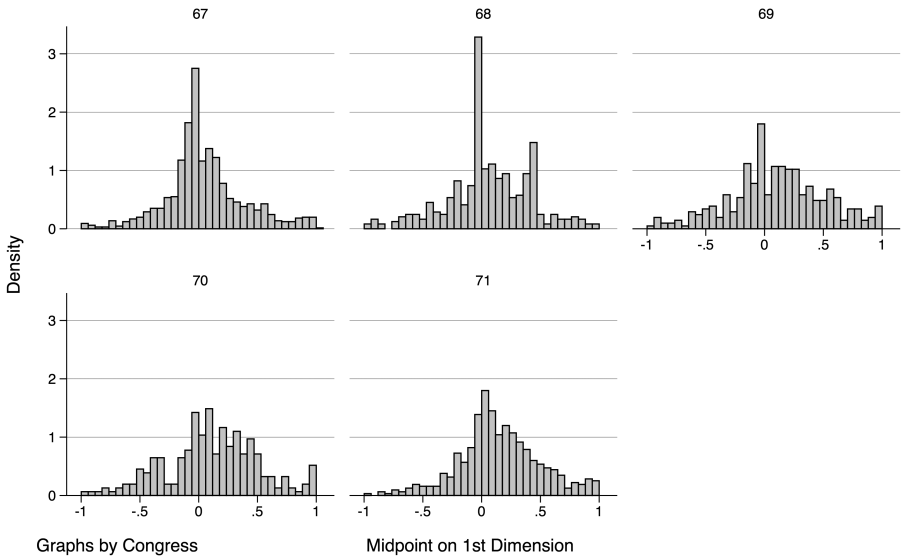


Figure 5: Distribution of first-dimension DW-NOMINATE cut points, 67th–71st Congresses (House of Representatives.)

create "artificial extremism" — i.e., greater polarization than the underlying set of ideal points would warrant.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of cut-points along the first DW-NOMINATE dimension for the five Congresses during the 1920s, which is the empirical focus of this article. We observe a change across the decade. In the 67th (1921–1923) and 68th (1923–1925) Congress, cut points tended to be located at the center of the ideological space. (Note, though, a smaller mode on the right side of the space in the 68th, indicating a cleavage within the Republican Party on some roll calls.) Beginning in the 69th Congress (1925–1927), however, cut points were more dispersed. Thus, any break in polarization we see during the 1920s may be as much a matter of the roll call agenda as the underlying preferences of members, or their natural predilections to reach across the aisle to form coalitions.

In keeping with the cut-point distribution change in the 1920s, one question is: What dynamics would produce the converse of artificial extremism — "artificial centrism"? This is not a topic that, to our knowledge, has elicited much theoretical or methodological attention, but would seem central to understanding about how roll call behavior could exhibit varying degrees of polarization over time.

We do not develop a full theory here, but sketch out an argument based on a simple application of the standard spatial model, under the conditions in which there is one "ideological" dimension and one "interest" dimension. The idea is illustrated in Figure 7. The ideal points are given for two members, A and B. On the Ideology dimension, A is to the left of B. A is a "high demand" legislator for a policy on the Interest dimension, while B's ideal point is set to zero on that dimension. A (dashed) contract curve is drawn between the two ideal points, under the assumption of circular indifference curves. Finally, A's ideal point projected onto the Ideology dimension is noted at A′.

Consider a status quo located at ϕ — halfway between A and B on the Ideology dimension and at zero on the Interest dimension. If legislative bargaining is confined to the Ideology dimension, then ϕ is an equilibrium in the bargaining between A and B. A bargain cannot be struck between A and B to shift the status quo — unless we allow A and B to introduce the Interest dimension.

The Interest dimension introduces the opportunity for A and B to bargain, in such a way that B could get an improvement along the Ideology dimension in exchange for offering A an improvement along the Interest dimension. A bargain between A and B in the two-dimensional setting will end up along the dashed contract curve; with circular indifference curves, the bargain will be somewhere in the (a,b) interval. The precise location of the bargain depends on things like agenda power and bargaining costs.

The important point, from the perspective of ideological polarization (which is measured solely along the Ideology dimension), is that this scenario sets up a situation in which A will end up voting *as if* A's ideal point were in the (a′,b′) interval. In other words, bargaining of this sort creates an *induced ideal point* along the Ideology dimension for A that is quite close to B's actual ideal point along that dimension. To the degree to which legislating involves a lot of logrolling of this sort — and this stylized story appears to be a good approximation to classical stories of passing tariff legislation — then observed behavior will mask the degree of actual ideological polarization.[11]

Ideological Polarization with Parties

As we have been discussing, legislative politics can give rise to roll call patterns that are more or less polarized than underlying ideological preferences, *even*

[11] To be clear, if we observe many roll call votes that are consistent with this scenario, we may be able to accurately locate the ideal points of A and B in two-space, and thus the problem of "artificial centrism" will be allayed. It is precisely that so many issues involving off-first-dimension issues are relatively idiosyncratic that makes it difficult to spot cross-dimension bargaining. That is why, to discover cross-dimension bargaining, it is sometimes necessary to focus one's attention on roll call votes where non-ideological votes are likely (Caughey and Schickler, 2016).

in the absence of political parties. However, the role of political parties in intervening between underlying preferences (either of constituents or legislators) and observed behavior has been the focus of much legislative research over the past two decades. Thus, we find it necessary only to mention in passing the party-related points here.

First, parties help to create ideological polarization, or at least magnify what already exists in the electorate, through *party nominating primaries.* It is well-known that primary electorates are more ideologically extreme than rank-and-file party identifiers, and thus a simple Downsian logic would tend to push successful nominees toward the extremes, compared to the electorate.[12] Regardless of the mechanism that gets them there, Ansolabehere *et al.* (2001) show that nominees have long been more extreme than their districts. The real question for our interests is the degree to which these dynamics have varied over time.

Second, parties act as "legislative cartels," by wielding significant agenda-setting power in Congress — or at least have since the late 19th century (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005; Gailmard and Jenkins, 2007; Jenkins and Stewart, III, 2013). One empirical implication of the legislative cartel is that floor voting is structured such that the majority party can remain unified in the face of efforts by the minority party to bid-away "moderate" (i.e., more like the minority) members of the majority. This produces the tendency to push cut-points in roll call votes away from the median of the majority caucus, creating an over-abundance of cut points on the minority side of the ideological dimension. As we noted before, anything that creates an artificial shortage of cut points in the ideological space creates artificial extremism in observed roll call behavior. The more successful the majority party leadership is at restricting roll call votes to those that keep the majority on one side of the cut line, the more polarization we will observe.

Finally, mass politics and institutional politics can converge, to enhance existing levels of polarization in the mass public. A major contributing factor leading to the rise of party polarization in Congress in the recent past has been the realignment of white southern voters to the Republican Party. This realignment has had three effects on observed polarization in Congress. First, the alignment of ideological sentiments has sorted Democrats and Republicans onto opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. Thus, even if underlying preferences are not bimodal, the resulting set of roll call votes will impose greater artificial extremism, through the exclusion of roll call votes that divide the majority. Second, the fact that ideological sentiments are highly aligned with party membership will allow the majority party leadership to pursue a partisan agenda strategy with greater frequency (Rohde, 1991).

[12]On the other hand, research has also shown party elites to be more attuned to the "electability" problem of extreme candidates, which would mitigate this dynamic somewhat.

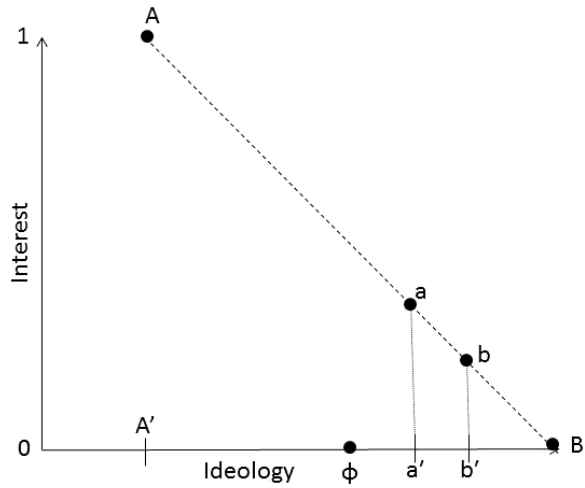


Figure 6: Styled bargaining model creating "artificial centrism."

Third, the sorting of the white South into the Republican Party provides fewer opportunities for off-first-dimensional bargaining of the sort explored in Figure 6. There is less to make southern districts "special," as far as the alignment of particular local sentiments are concerned. Thus, the types of legislative bargains that once produced artificial centrism have largely disappeared.

Some Empirical Implications

As a general matter, the discussion in this section should lead us to expect the following:

1. In the case of roll call voting in general, party should decline as a predictor of general roll call behavior beginning in the 1920s through the 1930s, as non-ideological factors loomed larger in legislative deal-making.

2. Beginning in the 1920s and persisting into the 1930s, party should gradually lose its grip on agenda setting, creating more opportunities for ideological moderates to defeat the wishes of the more extreme mainstream of the majority party.

3. Party regularity should be challenged via a rise of cross-regional coalitions during the 1920s. The Conservative Coalition is the best known of these cross-regional coalitions, but others, such as southern Democrats and Midwestern Republicans in agricultural matters, may also form.

Roll Call Voting Patterns

In this section, we turn our attention to roll call voting patterns, focusing on the 1920s. We began the article by discussing the well-known trends illustrated by DW-NOMINATE scores, and noting the declining partisan polarization beginning around 1920. In this section, we consider two angles from which to examine this decline.[13] The first is through the lens of *conversion* versus *replacement* as drivers of ideological change in Congress. Did Congress become more moderate over time in the 1920s because continuing members gradually moderated their views, or because more extreme members were replaced by moderates, as electoral dynamics evolved in the constituencies?

Using a different form of DW-NOMINATE score for the analysis, we observe both conversion and replacement — but the evidence suggests that replacement played a larger role during this period. However, replacement worked differently in the two parties. Among Republicans, freshmen who replaced other Republicans were more moderate than those they replaced; among Democrats, replacement is mainly seen when newly elected Democrats replaced Republicans.[14] These patterns suggest that a change in mass politics, resulting in new and more moderate members of the House, played a significant role in driving depolarization.

The second angle we pursue considers the importance of specific issues in cross-party coalitions. While DW-NOMINATE scores provide a good first cut at examining polarization, Caughey and Schickler (2016) argue that it is often more fruitful to create custom scores that are tailored to the specific research question being asked.[15] We thus subset roll call votes by issue (specifically, agriculture votes and tariff votes) and create custom W-NOMINATE scores.[16] We begin this discussion with some general patterns around the topic of replacement versus conversion, then turn to focus on agricultural and tariff votes.

[13]In an earlier working paper (Chatfield *et al.*, 2015), we considered a third angle: the possibility that the distribution of roll call votes across substantive and procedural categories changed during this period. In particular, if procedural roll call votes tended to polarize the parties more than substantive ones, and if the share of roll call votes that were procedural was falling, then depolarization could have simply been a matter of a changing mix of roll call votes. We were able to eliminate that possibility, and therefore do not pursue it any further here.

[14]Of course, this intra-party replacement dynamic was confined to northern Democrats and Republicans.

[15]For a defense of DW-NOMINATE scores in this context, see McCarty (2016).

[16]The W-NOMINATE procedure produces static scores for a single Congress (or set of Congresses). For more details, see Poole *et al.* (2011).

The Roles of Replacement versus Conversion in Depolarization

We use One Congress at a Time DW-NOMINATE scores, otherwise known as Nokken–Poole scores, to examine the ways in which House members moved over time (Nokken and Poole, 2004). These scores allow members to move linearly in either a negative (liberal) or positive (conservative) direction — which we think is important for examining the possibility of conversion among existing members — and thus are more flexible than the static DW-NOMINATE scores used in the earlier analyses.[17] While individual Nokken–Poole scores vary from Congress-to-Congress, in the aggregate they present a very similar picture of polarization over time as the traditional DW-NOMINATE scores, and the scores are highly correlated.

Figure 7 plots Nokken–Poole scores for three groups of members in each party: incumbents who are reelected; within-party replacers, who are elected to replace a member of their same party; and cross-party replacers, who are elected to replace a member of the opposing party. Note that there are gaps

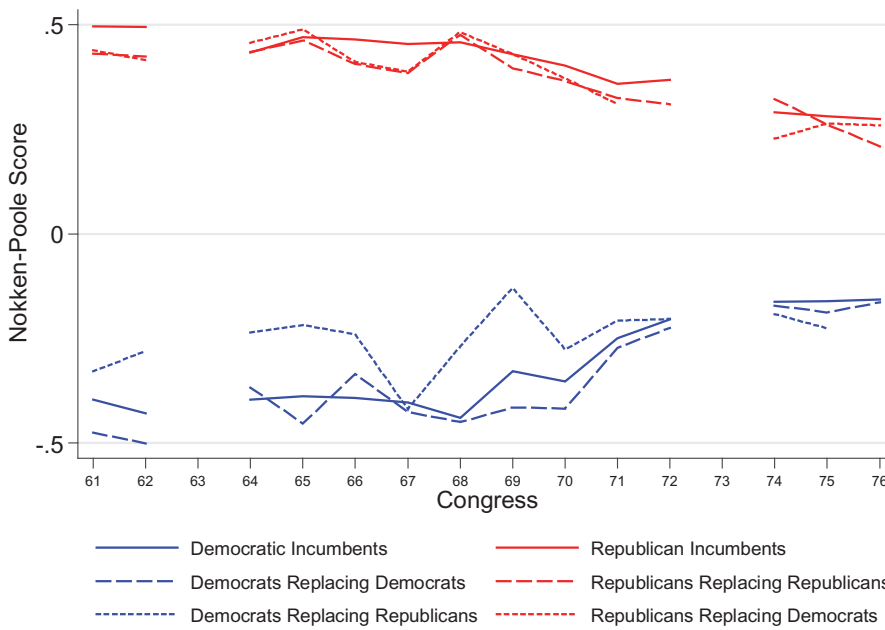


Figure 7: Nokken–Poole scores for incumbents and replacers.

[17]By allowing members to move in *either* direction, Nokken–Poole scores are similar to Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) scores.

in the plot for years in which redistricting occurred, since a change in district boundaries complicates the identification of replacements.[18]

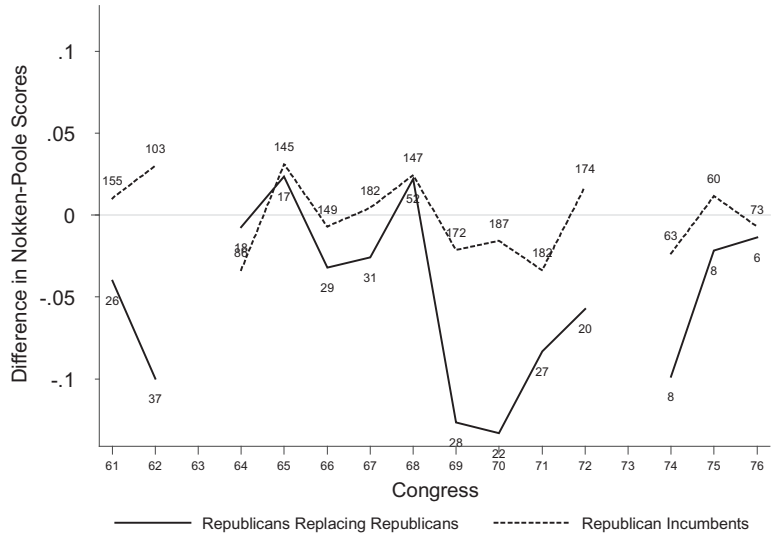
One important thing to note is that all three groups become more moderate over time; especially in the 1930s, these three groups look very similar for both parties, and all are much more moderate than in earlier decades. That said, replacers do seem to lead the charge toward moderation, especially in the Democratic party. Democrats who replace Republicans (which during this period means northern Democrats) are generally much more moderate than other Democrats through the 1920s. In the Republican Party, the differences are more modest, but replacers also tend to be more moderate than incumbents through the 1920s.

Figures 8 and 9 indicate the change in Nokken–Poole score from one Congress to the next for incumbents and replacers in each party. The figures are constructed as follows. First, we calculated the difference in Nokken–Poole scores between the House member holding a particular seat in Congress t, compared to the House member who held the same seat in Congress $t-1$. Figure 8a, for instance, shows these differences for situations in which the same Republican held the seat in both Congresses (dotted line), compared to situations in which a different Republican held the same seat in the two successive Congresses (solid line). Then, for each Congress, we subtracted the "replacement difference" from the "incumbent difference," to create a type of difference-in-differences measure. In Figure 8b, for instance, the line indicates the Nokken–Poole gap between incumbent and newly elected Republicans, with positive values indicating newly elected Republicans were more moderate than the set of incumbents who were returning that Congress. Figure 9 shows the raw differences for northern Democrats (Figure 9a) and southern Democrats (Figure 9b), with the difference-in-differences measure shown for each contingent separately (Figure 9c).

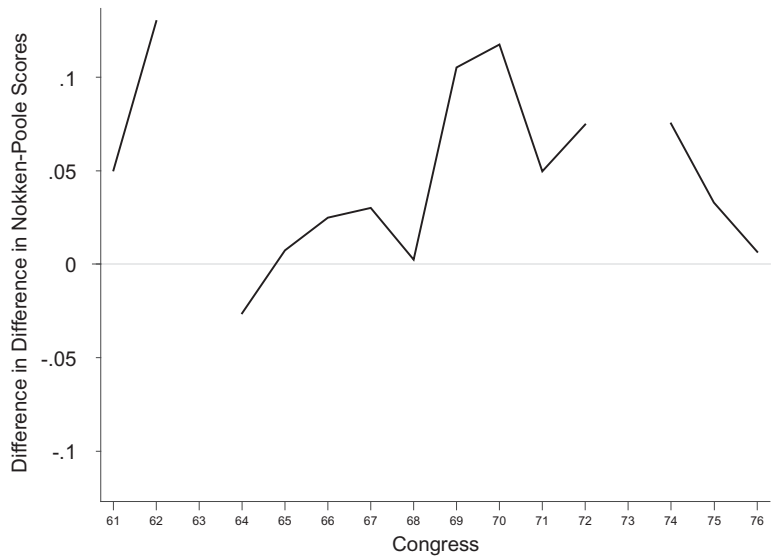
On the Republican side (Figure 8), replacers account for much more of the Congress-to-Congress shift toward moderation than do incumbents. While Republican incumbents as a group are becoming more moderate (see Figure 7), those who remain in the chamber are not systematically moving to the left. Instead, incumbents on average retain their ideology from the previous Congress; incumbents as a whole become more moderate as these new members remain in the chamber, thus shifting the caucus leftward.

On the Democratic side (Figure 9), it is clear that most of the movement toward the Republican Party is coming from southern Democrats — northern Democrats who replace other northern Democrats are often even more liberal than their predecessors. Thus, on the Democratic side, the move toward the middle seems to be driven largely by northern Democrats who replace

[18] We treat election years ending in "2" as constituting a new set of districts, with the exception of 1922, because of the failure of Congress to reapportion following the 1920 census.

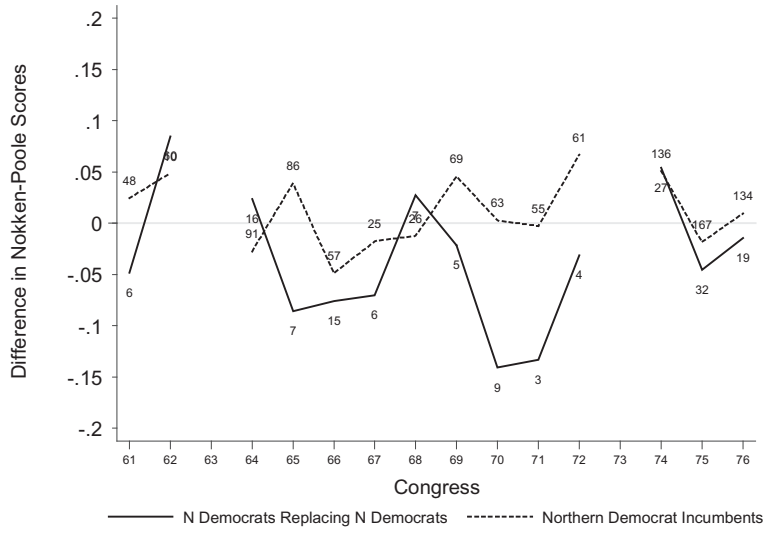


(a)

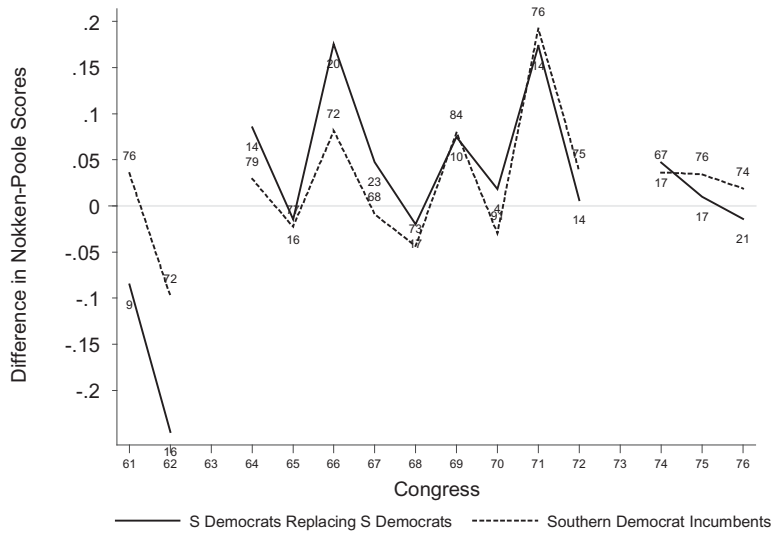


(b)

Figure 8: Republican replacers versus Republican incumbents: Difference in Nokken–Poole scores between previous and current congresses. (a) Raw differences. *Note*: Numbers represent number of replacers or incumbents in a given Congress. (b) Difference between incumbents and replacers. *Note*: Positive numbers indicate that replacers are more moderate than incumbents.

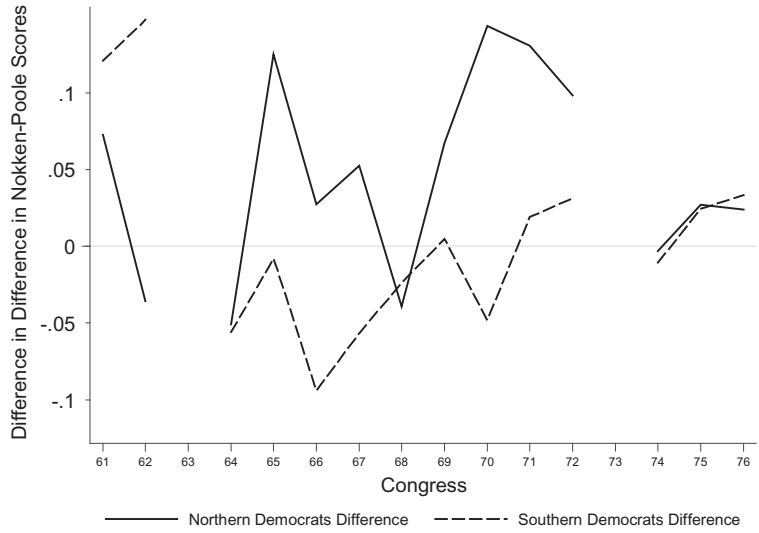


(a)



(b)

Figure 9: Democratic Replacers versus Democratic Incumbents: Difference in Nokken–Poole scores between previous and current Congresses. (a) Raw differences: Northern Democrats. *Note*: Numbers represent number of replacers or incumbents in a given Congress. (b) Raw differences: Southern Democrats. *Note*: Numbers represent number of replacers or incumbents in a given Congress. (c) Difference between incumbents and replacers. *Note*: Positive numbers here indicate that replacers are more liberal/extreme than incumbents; negative numbers indicate that replacers are more moderate than incumbents.



(c)

Figure 9: (*Continued*)

Republican House members (see Figure 7) and by southern Democrats overall — primarily replacers, but sometimes incumbents as well.

Farm Bloc/Agriculture Votes

Earlier, we reviewed the rise of the Farm Bloc and the ways in which members of Congress from farm states attempted to surmount partisan divisions in various attempts to provide federal benefits to farmers in light of historic animosity to such efforts among political leaders of both parties.

The occasional success of the Farm Bloc (or farm bloc) raises the question of whether agricultural issues more generally escaped ideological classification in the same way that roll call votes more generally were arrayed ideologically during this period. To help address this question, we created W-NOMINATE scores for agriculture votes in the House in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s.[19] Each decade was pooled to create enough votes to estimate the model. Although some legislators were dropped because they did not have enough recorded votes, the scores for those that could be calculated are displayed in Figure 10.

Coalitional voting seems to have been more common on agriculture votes during the 1920s, particularly from Republicans who voted more progressively on agriculture issues. By that we mean that Democrats were distinctly

[19]Issue codes are from Voteview.com (Lewis *et al.*, 2021).

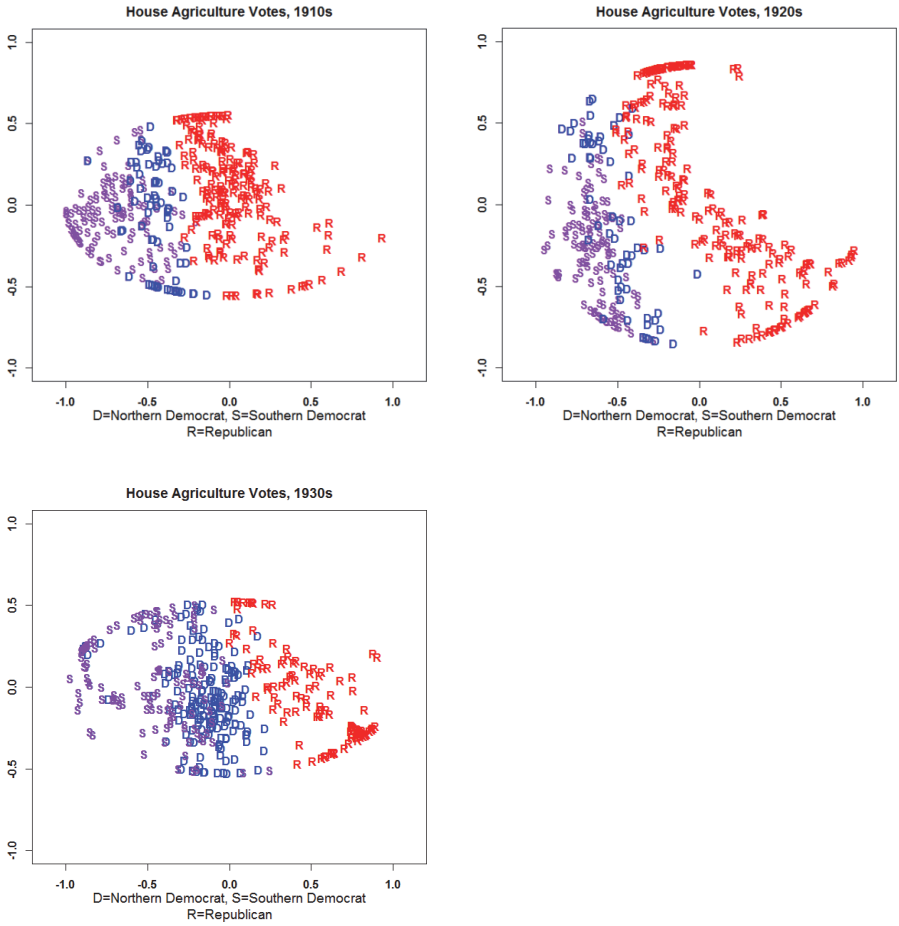


Figure 10: House agriculture votes in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s.

arrayed to the "left" and Republicans to the "right" in the space during the 1910s and 1930s, whereas there is significant overlap of the parties along the main dimension during the 1920s. This suggests that there was less partisan polarization in agricultural issues more generally during the 1920s — not just in the Farm Bloc case, but in farming legislation as a whole. However, the evidence here is weak, if we want to claim that legislating in agricultural matters during the 1920s, per se, led to the decline of partisan polarization during this period.

To supplement the previous analysis, Table 1 provides roll rates on agricultural votes for each decade — where a roll rate is the number of bills a

Table 1: Roll rates on agriculture votes, 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s.

Congresses	Majority roll rate (%)	Republican roll rate (%)	Democratic roll rate (%)	Northern Democratic roll rate (%)	Southern Democratic roll rate (%)
(a) House of Representatives*					
62–66 (1910s)	11	15	15	15	16
67–71 (1920s)	9	9	20	27	23
72–76 (1930s)	4	59	4	2	4
(b) Senate†					
62–66 (1910s)	7	14	14	15	16
67–71 (1920s)	8	8	18	15	17
72–76 (1930s)	7	19	7	3	11

*Democrats are in the majority for Congresses 62–65 and 72–76; Republicans are in the majority for Congresses 66–71.
†Democrats are in the majority for Congresses 63–65 and 73–76; Republicans are in the majority for Congresses 62 and 66–72.

majority of a coalition opposes that go on to pass divided by all bills.[20] As we might expect, in the House (Table 1a) both Democrats and Republicans are occasionally rolled when in the majority and more likely to be rolled when in the minority. Southern Democrats do seem to form coalitions with Republicans on agriculture votes more than northern Democrats do, being rolled relatively more often during years of Democratic majorities and relatively less often during Republican-majority Congresses.

Roll rates give a less clear picture of coalitional voting in the Senate (see Table 1b). Although southern Democrats are rolled more often in the 1930s, a period of largely Democratic control, they are also rolled slightly more often than northern Democrats during years of Republican control. That said, W-NOMINATE scores — displayed in Figure 11 by party and region — tell a clearer picture of depolarization. The 1910s were fairly polarized years in the Senate on agriculture issues. By the 1920s, voting was far more moderate on this issue, with significant overlap between Democratic and Republican Senators, a pattern that continued in the 1930s. Interestingly, this movement occurred among Republicans and southern Democrats, but also among northern Democrats, some of whom voted quite conservatively on agricultural issues.

[20]Roll rates can thus be thought of as an empirical marker of negative agenda control, in that rolls are observed "failures" of the coalition to successfully stop measures that its members oppose. For more on roll rates, especially applied to party politics, see Cox and McCubbins (2005).

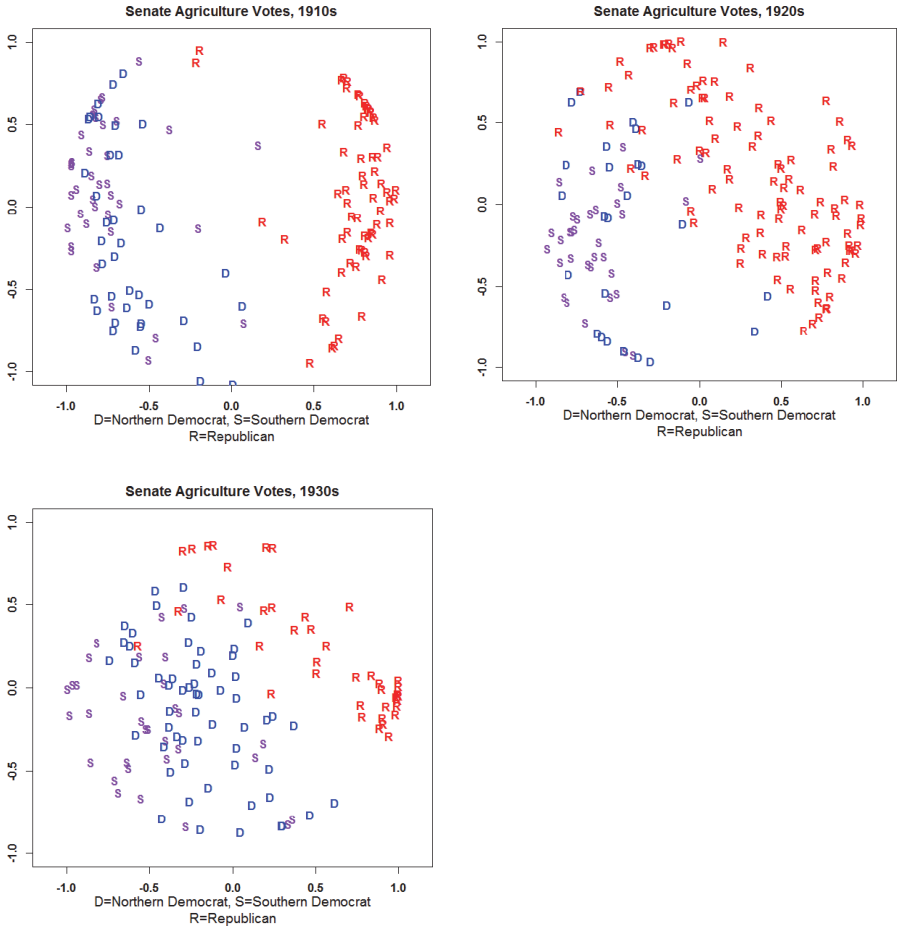


Figure 11: Senate agriculture votes in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s.

Overall, in both the House and the Senate, an analysis of agricultural votes lends some support to the idea that this issue was an important factor in depolarization, above and beyond Farm Bloc-specific votes. In the House, Republicans and southern Democrats seem to have formed a coalition on at least some agriculture votes. And, in the Senate, both northern and southern Democrats (as well as Republicans) were willing to move to the middle on agricultural bills. These coalitions track the party-disaggregated polarization scores discussed above, which reveal moderation among Democrats of both regions in the Senate, but among southern Democrats only in the House.

Tariff Votes

We noted how tariff politics unfolded such that members were spurred on to seek advantages for their constituents, disregarding the classical positions held by their parties on the issue. To explore the degree to which tariff politics during the 1920s might have been critical to the long-term trend away from partisan polarization, we performed an analysis for tariff votes similar to the analysis performed on agricultural votes. The Smoot–Hawley Act, passed in 1930, was the last significant tariff bill of this period, and there were very few tariff votes in the 1930s (Wawro and Schickler, 2006). Therefore, only the 1910s and 1920s are analyzed here.

The W-NOMINATE scores for House roll call votes are displayed in Figure 12. Members seem to be quite polarized in the 1910s, while more moderates on tariff issues emerge in the 1920s. A similar pattern appears in the Senate (see Figure 13). The Senate was very polarized on tariff roll calls in the 1910s, with a few Southern Democrats voting moderately (but otherwise few moderate Senators on this issue). In contrast, in the 1920s, the Senate became much less polarized on tariff votes. As with agriculture roll calls, this movement comes from Republicans, northern Democrats, and southern Democrats, and there is significant overlap between the parties. While not definitive, this evidence suggests that tariff politics was indeed another issue area that contributed to depolarization in both chambers.

Roll rates are less informative for tariff votes, but they are reported in Table 2 for the purposes of comparison. Tariff votes display more partisan

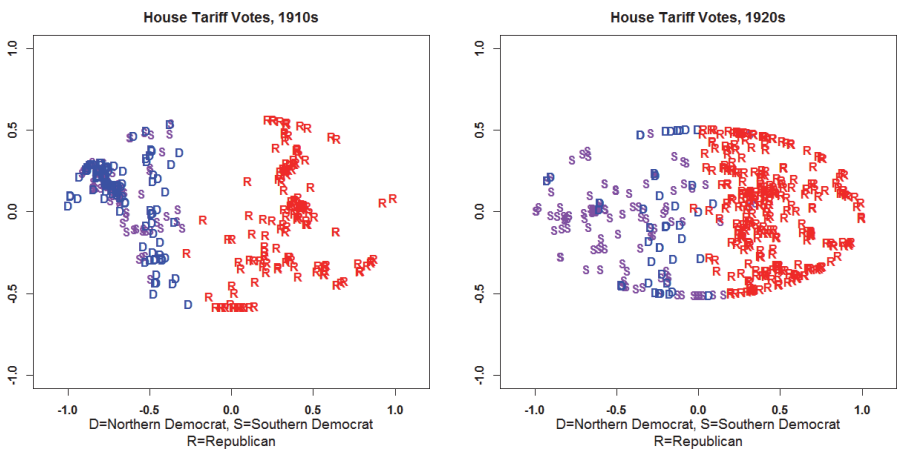


Figure 12: House tariff votes in the 1910s and 1920s.

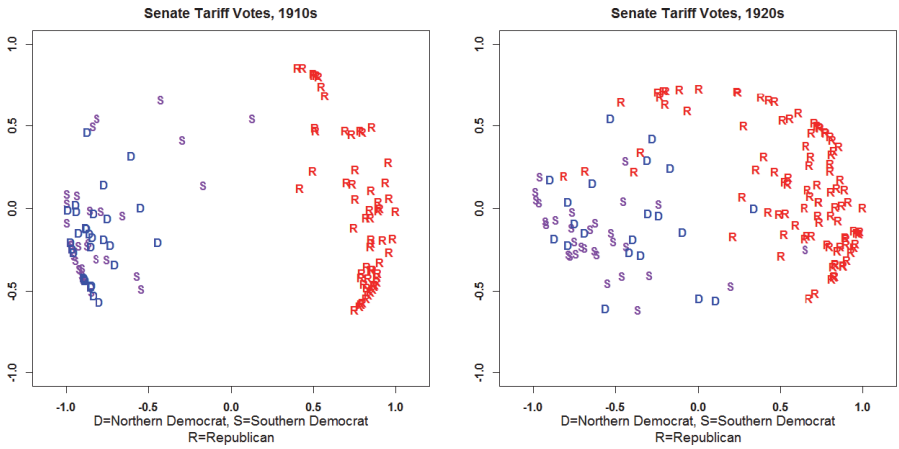


Figure 13: Senate tariff votes in the 1910s and 1920s.

Table 2: Roll rates on tariff votes, 1910s and 1920s.

Congresses	Majority roll rate (%)	Republican roll rate (%)	Democratic roll rate (%)	Northern Democratic roll rate (%)	Southern Democratic roll rate (%)
(a) House of Representatives*					
62–66 (1910s)	0	47	16	16	16
67–71 (1920s)	6	6	58	52	58
(b) Senate†					
62–66 (1910s)	8	20	8	8	8
67–71 (1920s)	11	11	22	19	22

*Democrats are in the majority for Congresses 62–65; Republicans are in the majority for Congresses 66–71.
†Democrats are in the majority for Congresses 63–65 and 73–76; Republicans are in the majority for Congresses 62 and 66–72.

division than agricultural votes, and less evidence of inter-party coalitions, particularly in the House.

Conclusion

The 1920s represent an inflection point in the partisan polarization of Congress. Here, we have begun the process of sorting through various claims about what

led to the depolarization of congressional politics that had been so evident at the turn of the century.

There are many possible sources of this depolarization, ranging from shifting demographics that continued to swell the cities at the expense of the farms to internal changes in the distribution of power on Capitol Hill. We have provided evidence that replacement among both Democrats (especially southern Democrats) and Republicans drove depolarization during the 1920s and 1930s. Although these patterns varied between the parties, this evidence points to the importance of changes in mass politics, as opposed to simply changes internal to Congress, in driving depolarization. Future research should explore the mass changes that may have motivated these changes in congressional voting behavior.

Second, we have explored ways in which two policy areas provided important opportunities for cross-party and cross-regional coalitions before the formation of the Conservative Coalition. Although the qualitative and roll call evidence suggests that agricultural and tariff policies were key early areas of interparty cooperation, further evidence is needed to flesh out these stories. One approach would be to look specifically at the members who made up the Farm Bloc (or who voted consistently with the lowercase "farm bloc") and examine their voting patterns both on other issues and over time as the agenda evolved (for those who remained in Congress).

In sum, we have offered insights into how American politics settled into the era of cross-party deal-making that so many people long for today. Our exploration of the 1920s suggests that this less polarized era was the result of a confluence of economic forces and mass politics. Precisely how much these general factors contributed to an era of centrist policymaking is something for future research to uncover.

How might this past period of depolarization be compared to the present day? One important difference is that the cross-party coalitions of the 1920s were not multiracial. Only one Black member of Congress served for any part of the 1920s, and Black voters were largely disenfranchised by Jim Crow during this period. Today, race and partisanship have become closely intertwined (Westwood and Peterson, 2020; White and Laird, 2020). As such, any potential depolarization would likely need to look much different than that of the 1920s, with a need to address polarization based on the overlapping and reinforcing identities of both partisanship and race.

The importance of formal cross-party blocs with procedural and agenda power is also interesting to consider. In recent years, the most prominent congressional coalitions have been intraparty rather than cross-party, including the House Freedom Caucus on the Republican side and the Congressional Progressive Caucus on the Democratic side. And, even among intraparty organizations, centrists within each party have often faced serious organizational challenges in the contemporary Congress (Rubin, 2021). The emergence of a

more moderate, cross-party caucus with the potential to fuel interparty cooperation and depolarization has not developed as a meaningful answer to high levels of partisan polarization. The reasons for this are likely multi-factored and overlapping, but may include the nationalization of politics; high levels of affective polarization among the general public (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019) that could lead politicians to pay a higher price for being seen as a "traitor" to their party; and the importance of message politics. Ultimately, the lessons of the 1920s do not necessarily chart a clear path forward for lessening the intense partisan polarization of the 2020s.

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