

Quote of the Day:

“There’s not a dime’s worth of difference between the Democrat and Republican parties.”

-- George Wallace, while running as a third-party candidate for president, 1968

Readings for next time

In thinking about political polarization, we need to be clear about (a) what we mean by the term, and (b) whether we're talking about elites, the mass public, or both.

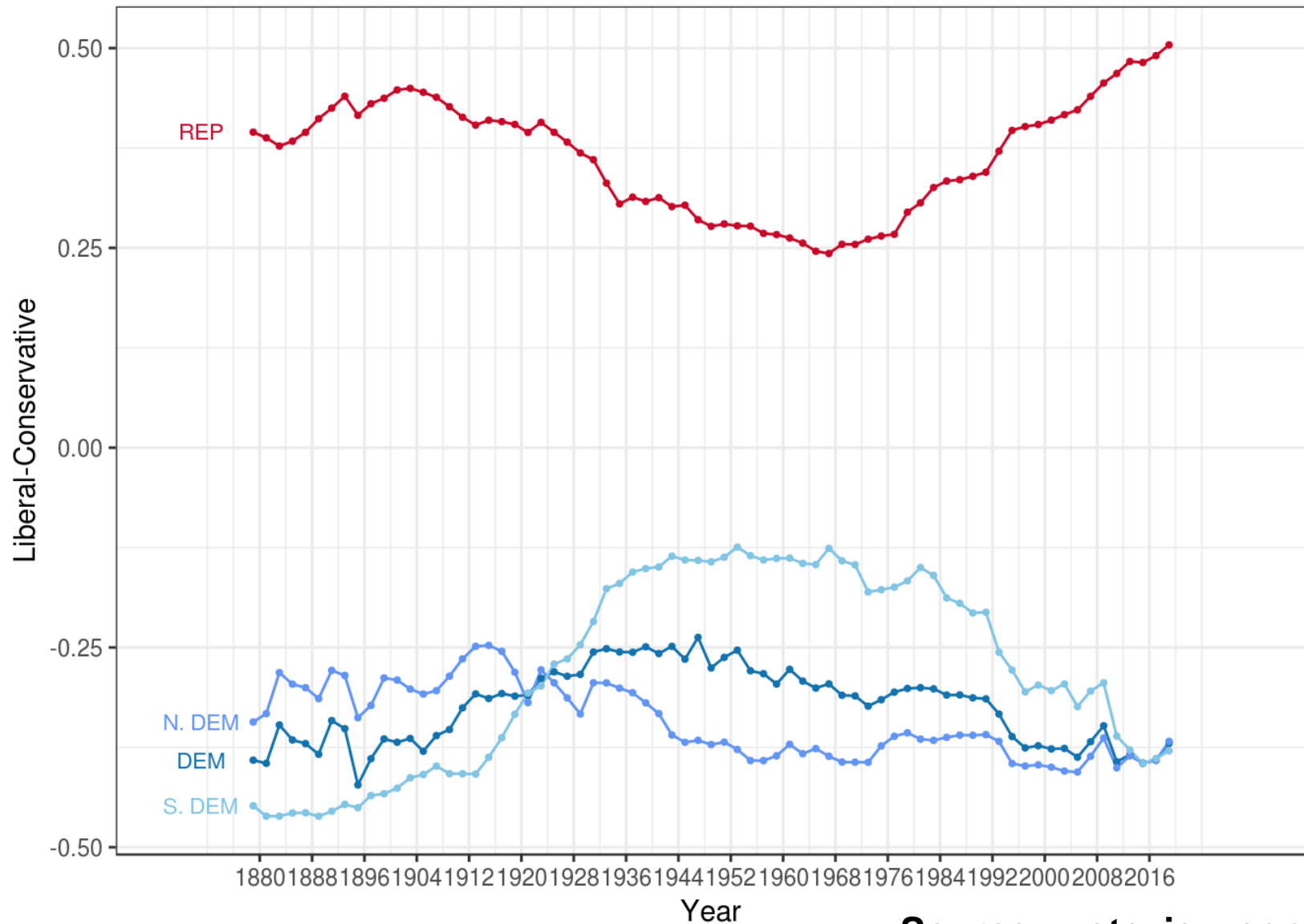
Two of the potential meanings of polarization:

- policy polarization: the distance between the parties on policy issues**
- affective polarization: the extent to which party members dislike members of the other party**

Why care about polarization? Some reasons: It increases gridlock, leads to a breakdown of democratic norms, and makes it harder for people to accept truths that their party rejects.

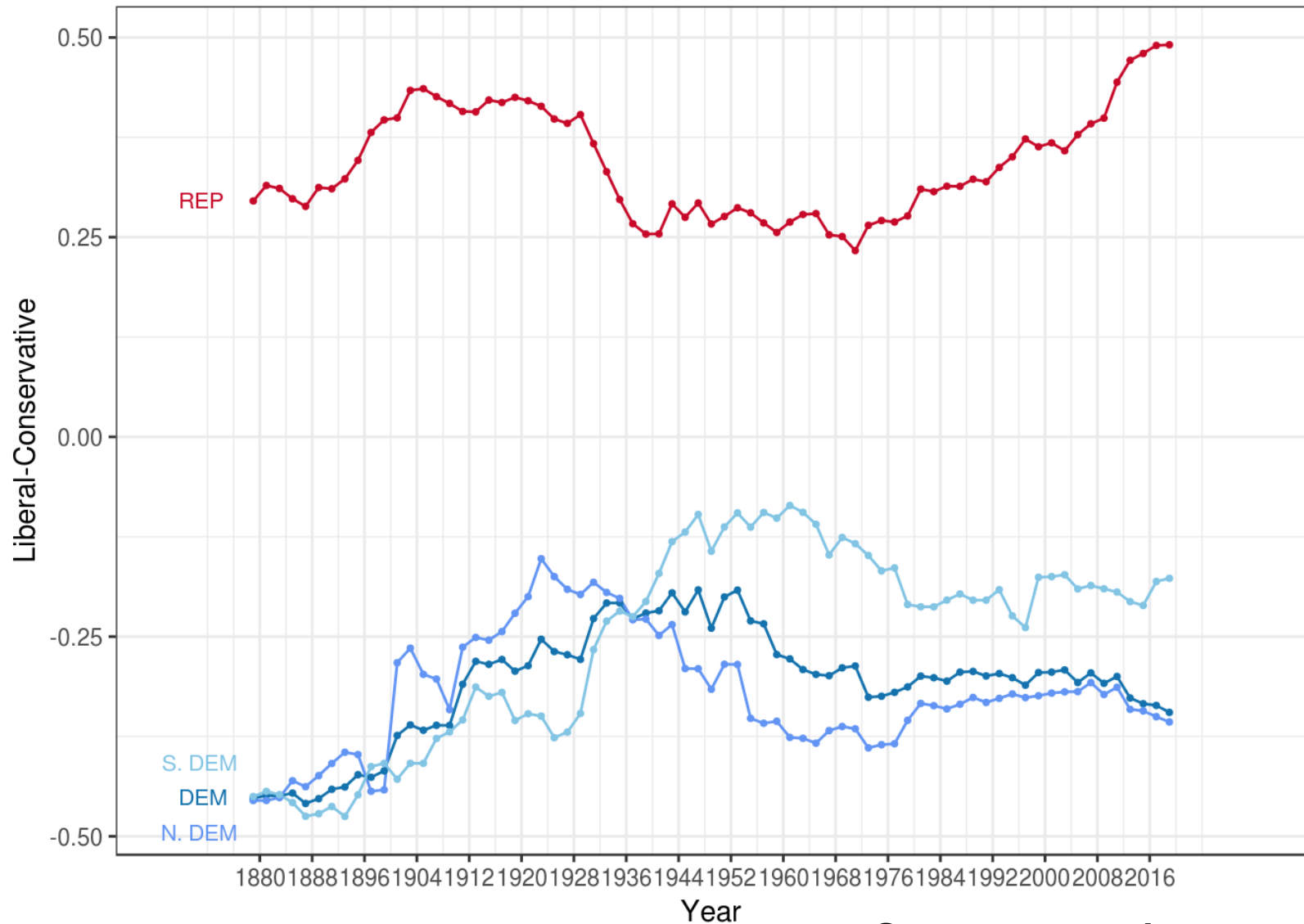
Let's start by looking at some measures of policy polarization, first among elites and then the mass public:

policy polarization in the U.S. House of Representatives



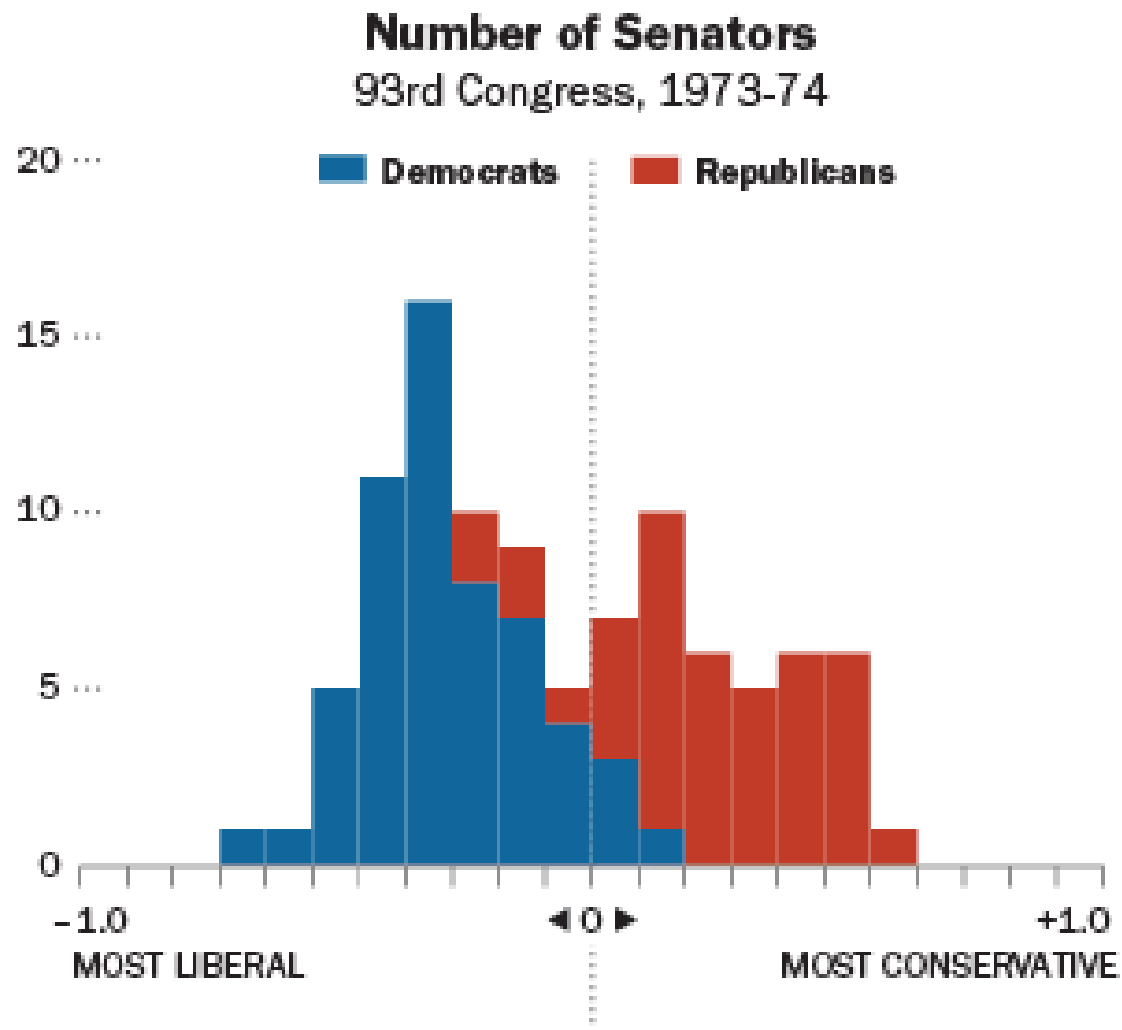
Source: voteview.com

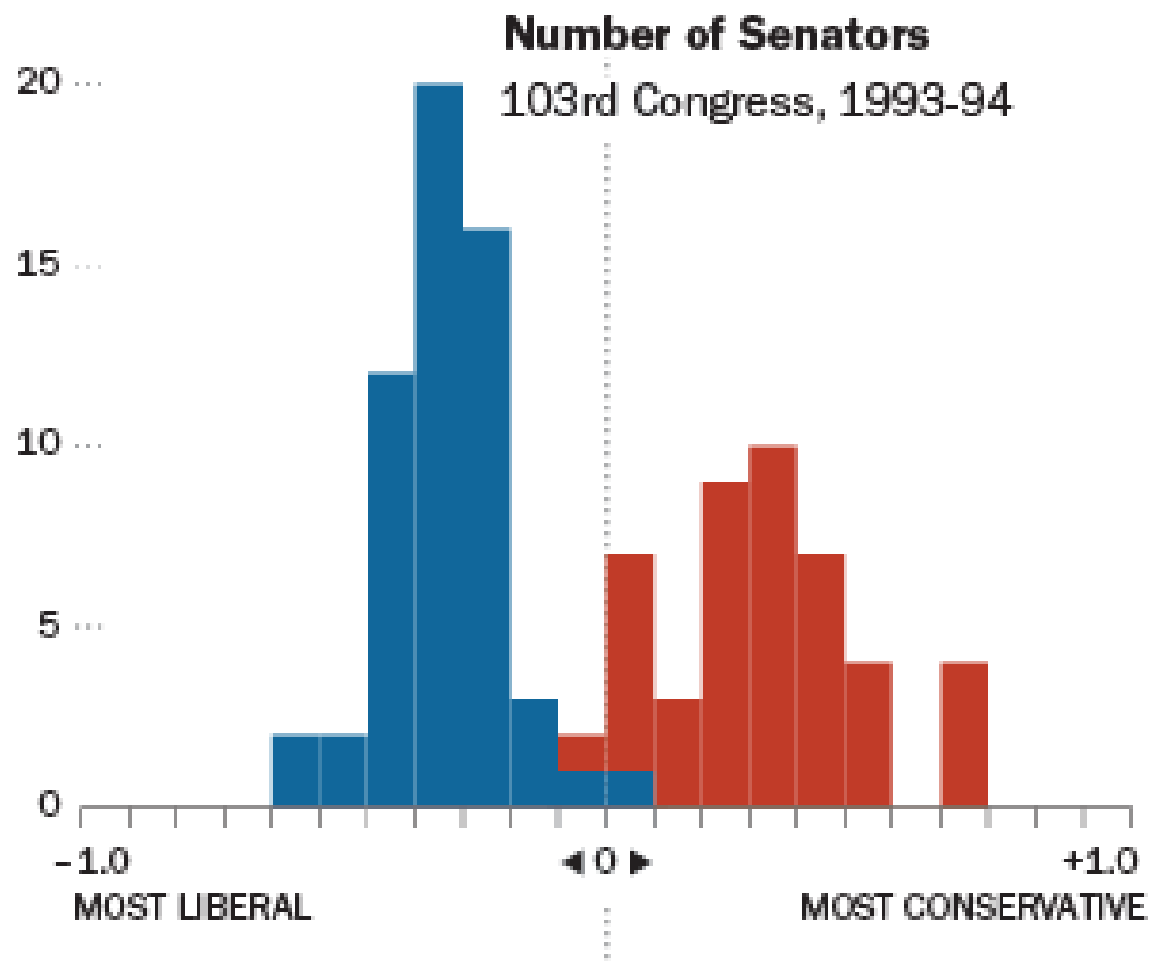
policy polarization in the U.S. Senate



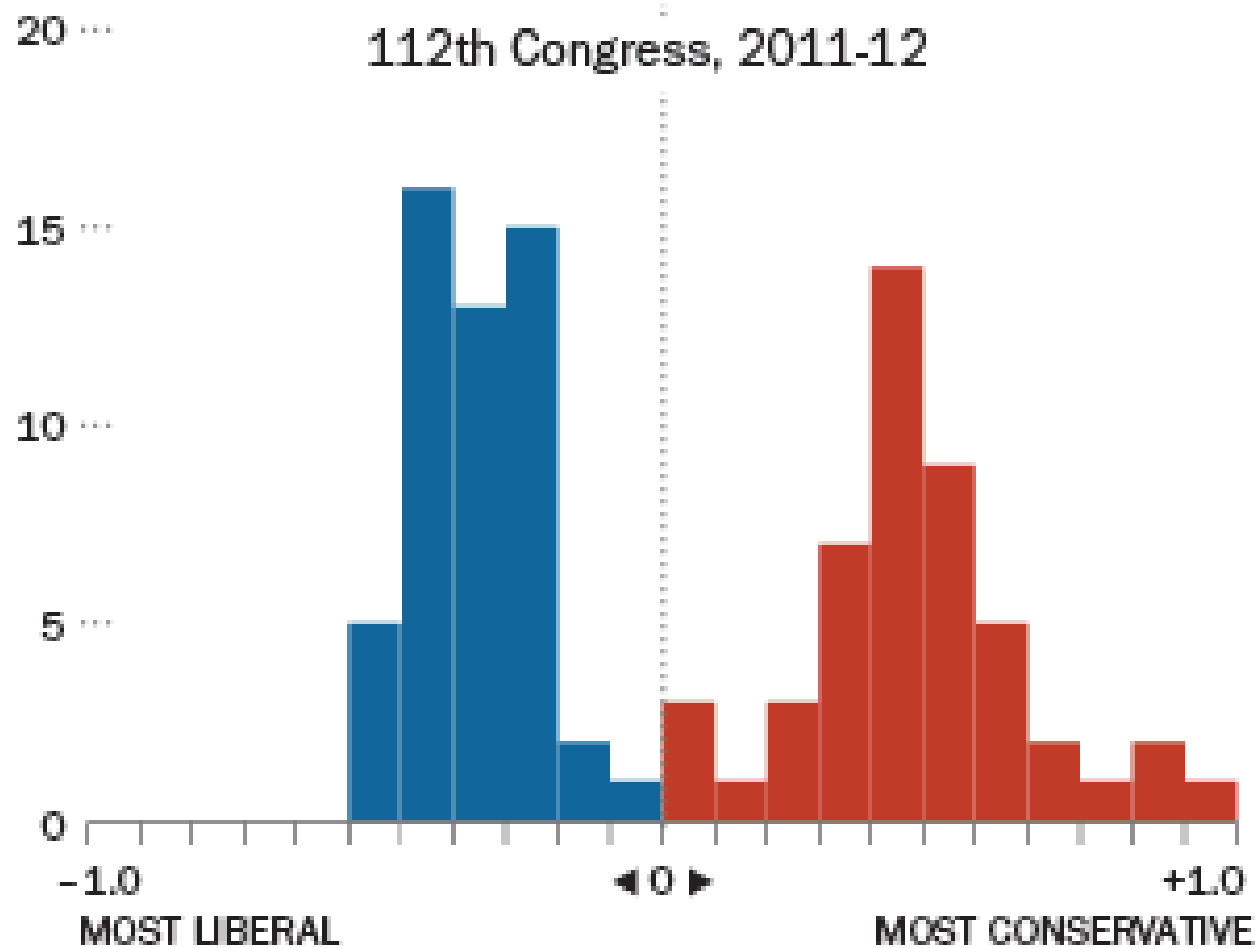
Source: voteview.com

Growing polarization in Congress

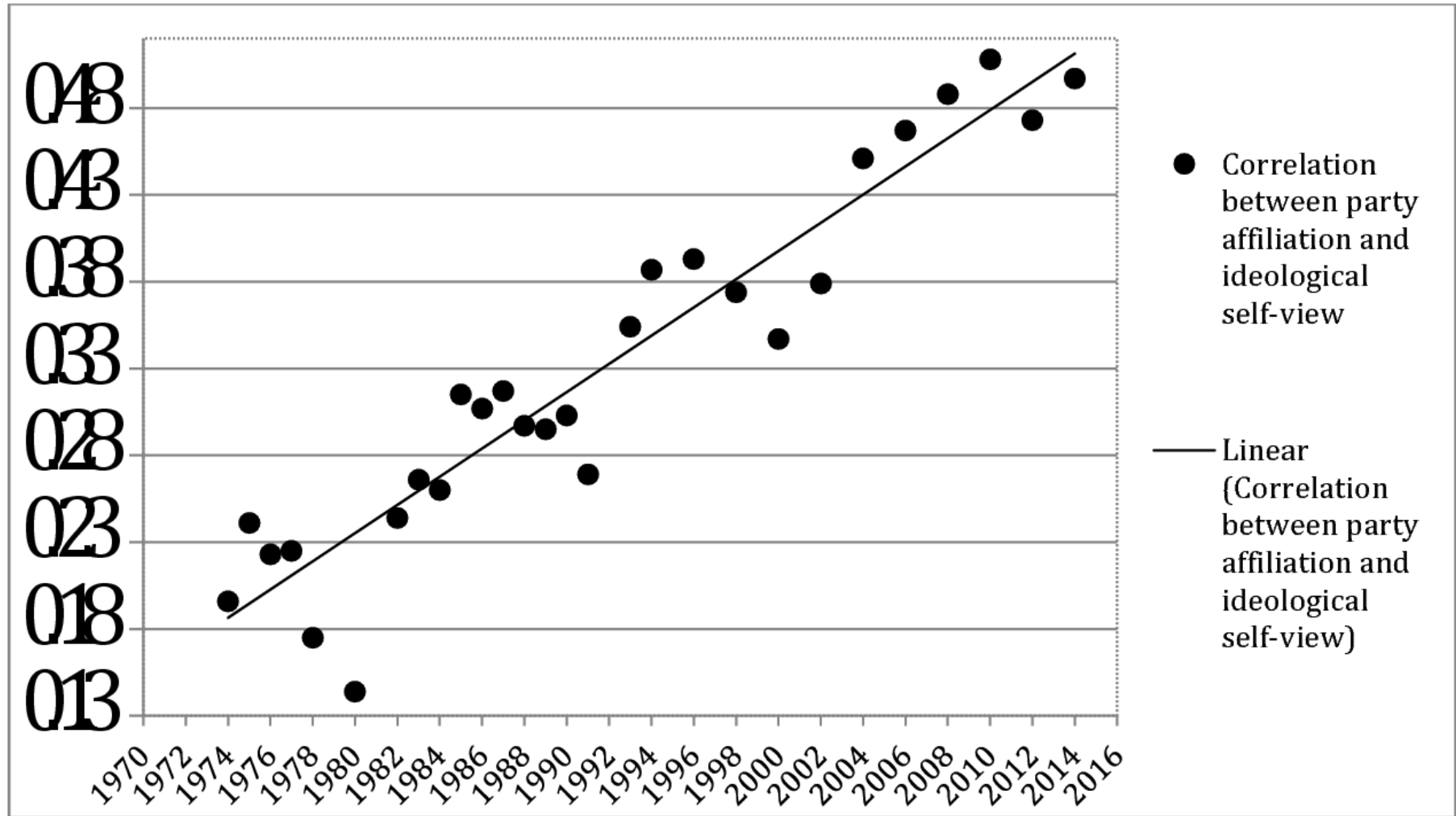




Number of Senators
112th Congress, 2011-12

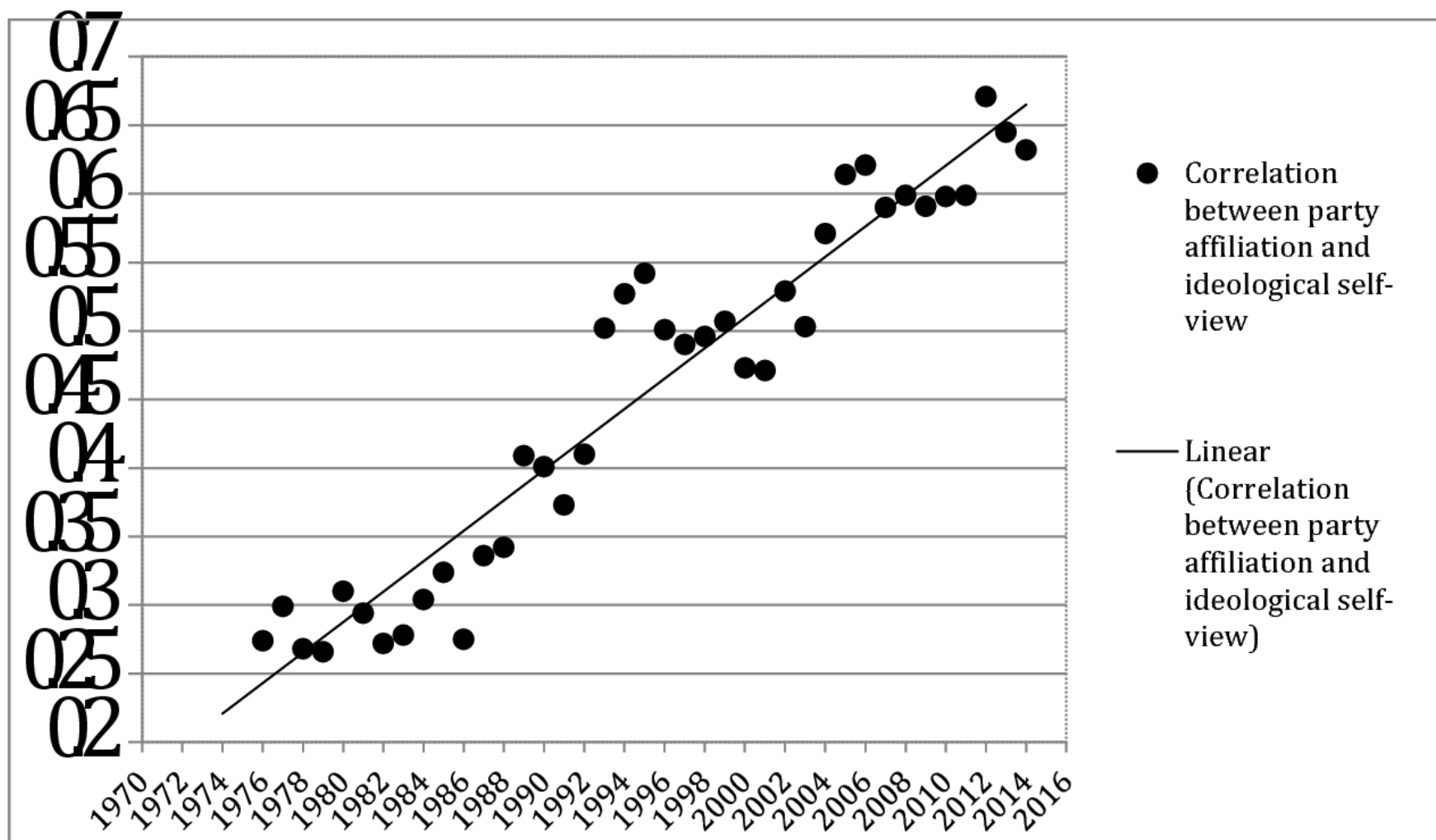


Correlation of party and ideology, adults



Source: Twenge, Honeycutt, Prislin, and Sherman 2016

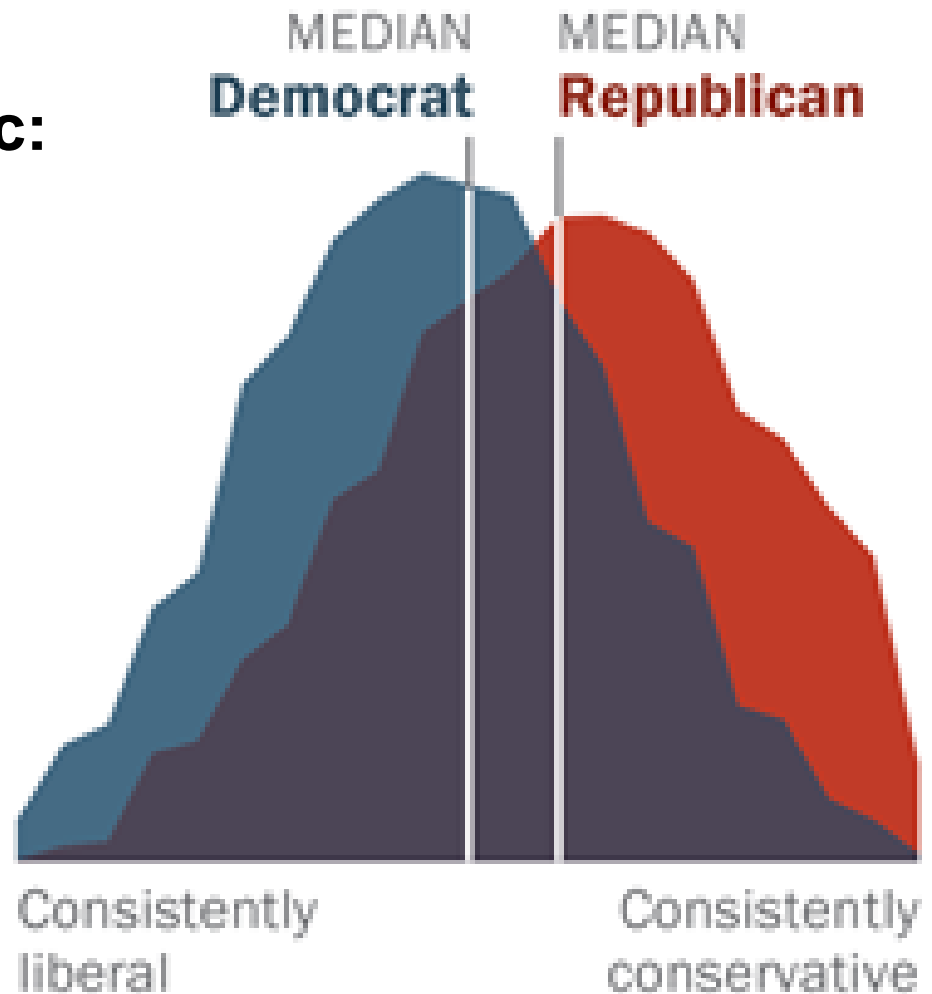
Correlation of party and ideology, 12th graders



Source: Twenge, Honeycutt, Prislin, and Sherman 2016

1994

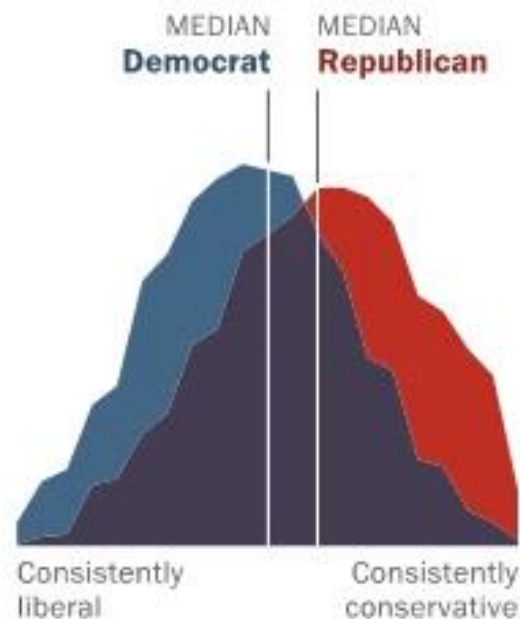
**10-item scale of political
values in the mass public:**



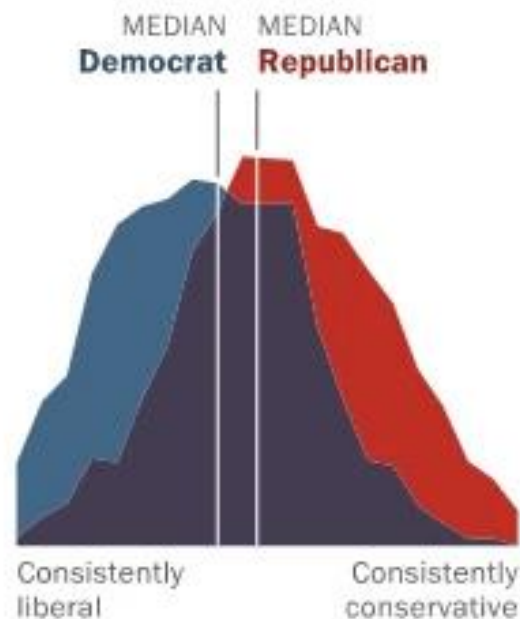
Democrats and Republicans more ideologically divided than in the past

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values

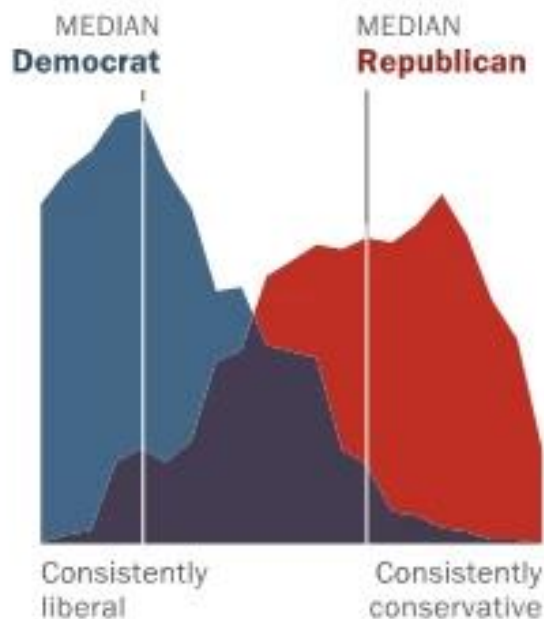
1994



2004



2017

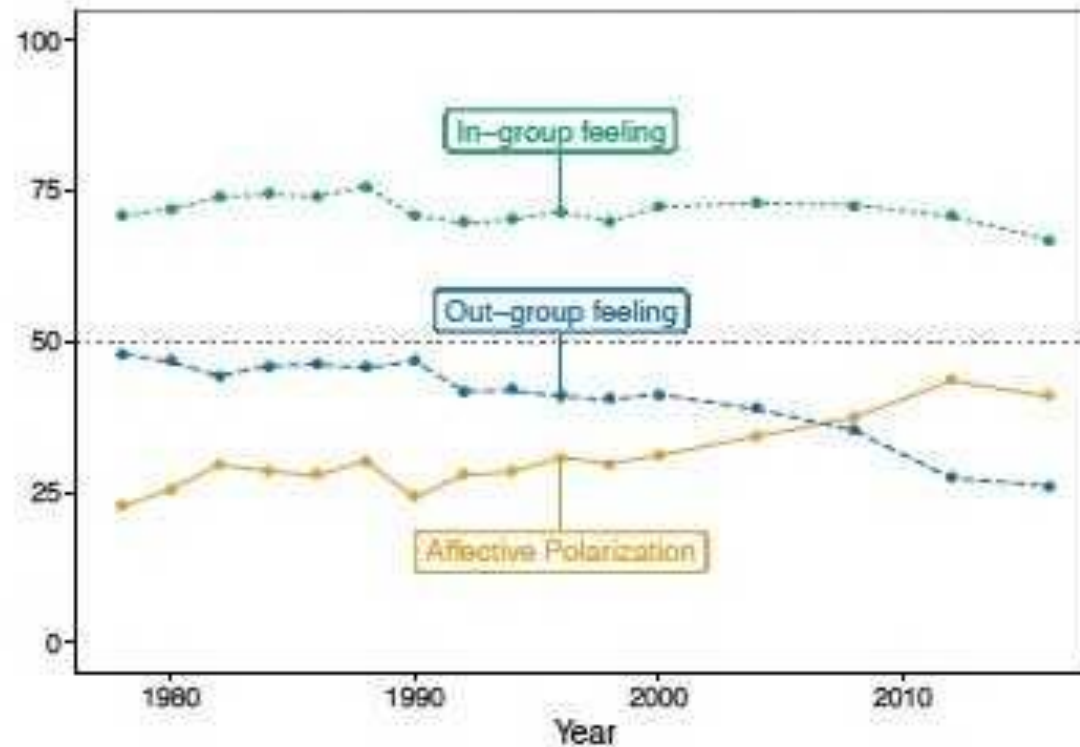


Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see methodology). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents; the red area of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple.

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017.

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Figure 1: Partisan Feeling and Affective Polarization Overtime (ANES)



Affective polarization is also manifest in hostile language on social media toward the other party, difficulties in having conversations across party lines, etc.

What has caused the increased polarization, first at the elite level and subsequently filtering down to the mass public?

Many people instinctively point to gerrymandering as the main cause. This explanation doesn't work because the Senate (which you can't gerrymander) is nearly as polarized as the House.

Polarization is a complex phenomenon, and we shouldn't expect to find a single cause. Political scientists have proposed several potential causes, including:

Potential cause #1: The South. Overwhelmingly Democratic from 1880 to the 1950s, becoming mostly Republican by the 1990s because of race and civil rights.

Replacing conservative Southern Democrats in Congress with conservative Southern Republicans pushed Democrats to the left and Republicans to the right (i.e., polarization)

Potential cause #2: stronger aggregate party competition after 1994

1955 to 1994: Democrats controlled the House of Representatives all 40 years and the Senate for all but 6. Republicans typically had a go-along-to-get-along attitude. Bipartisan legislation.

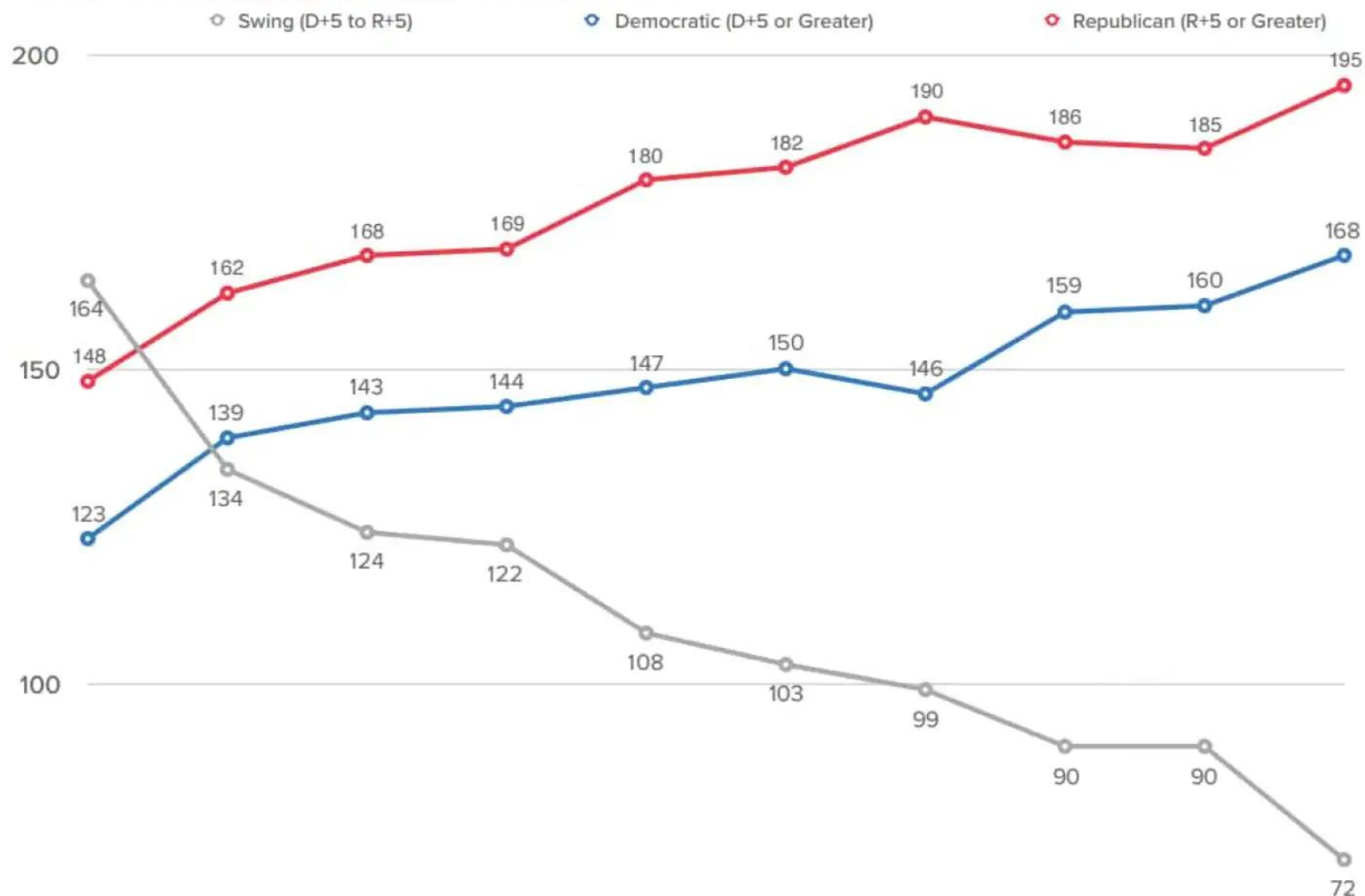
1995 to 2020: Back-and-forth control over each chamber, usually with close margins, mostly favoring Republicans

The parties are now more unified and less willing to compromise with the other party

Potential cause #3: weaker district and state competition

The number of competitive House districts has been cut by more than half in the last two decades.

The Incredible Shrinking Swing Seat, 1997 - 2017



1997	2001	2002	2004	2005	2009	2012	2013	2016	2017
After 1996 Election	After 2000 Election	After 2001 Redistricting	After TX Redistricting	After 2004 Election	After 2008 Election	After 2011 Redistricting	After 2012 Election	After FL/NC/VA Redistricting	After 2016 Election

The number of battleground states in presidential elections has also declined, even when the race is close nationally:

	<u>Number of states with a margin < 5%</u>
1960	19
1976	20
2000	12 (emergence of red state/blue state language)
2016	12

With weaker district and state competition, fewer politicians have to appeal to constituents from both parties. Meanwhile, the chance of getting “primaried” increases polarization.

Potential cause #4: less socializing within Congress and state legislatures between members of opposite parties.

Potential cause #5: At the mass level, greater stacking of identities (party with race, gender, religion, age, region, urban/rural, etc.). When one of a person's identities lose, they all lose, so the stakes are greater (Lilliana Mason).

Potential cause #6: People's choices of media sources, where to live, romantic partners, and community organizations

For most of the twentieth century, relatively nonpartisan media.

- Multiple newspapers per city, some differences across them, but most were relatively centrist**
- Rise of television news in the 1950s, generally centrist, high viewership (nothing else on TV).**
- CNN (centrist for a long time) launched in 1980. Cable television spread in the 1980s, but still few partisan outlets.**

- **Talk news (mostly conservative) gained popularity in 1990s, and Fox News (conservative) launched in 1996. MSNBC launched in 1996, started becoming more liberal around 2002. Conservative and liberal online sources proliferated in the early 2000s.**

- **You're more likely to be exposed to social media sources on your own side of the political divide**

The results: (a) fewer people follow political news; (b) those who do spend more time on it; (c) news followers pick sources (including social media) that reinforce their biases, thereby increasing polarization.

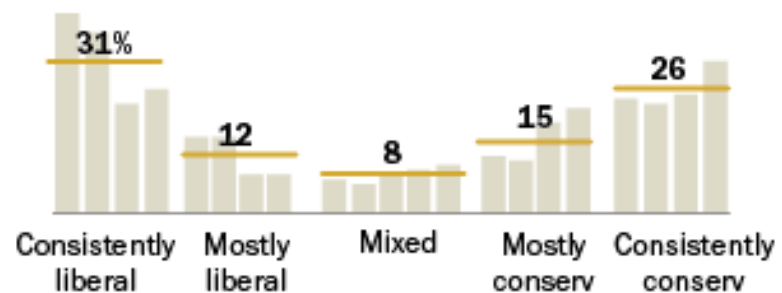
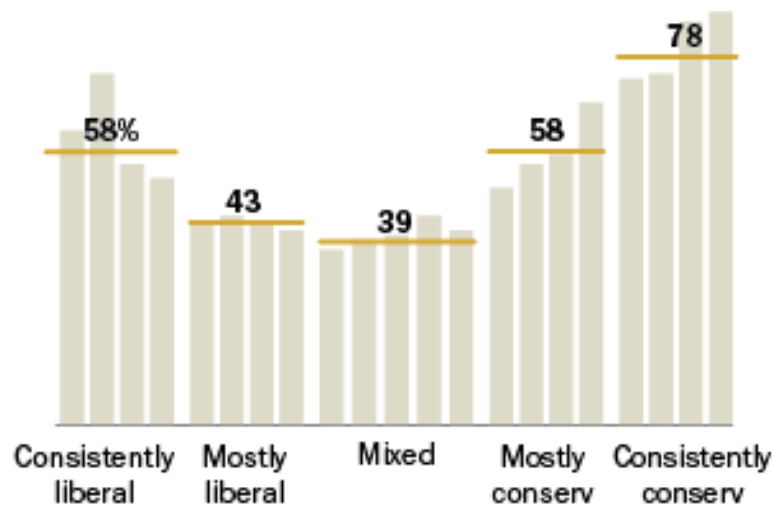
Moderates participate in politics much less than consistent conservatives or liberals, which further increases polarization.



Percent who **always vote**



Percent who contributed to a **political candidate or group** *in the past two years*



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Note: Bars represent the level of participation at each point on a 10 question scale of ideological consistency. Figures are reported on the five ideological consistency groups used throughout the report (see Appendix A).

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Political Activism on the Left and the Right

In the past two years, percent who have ...



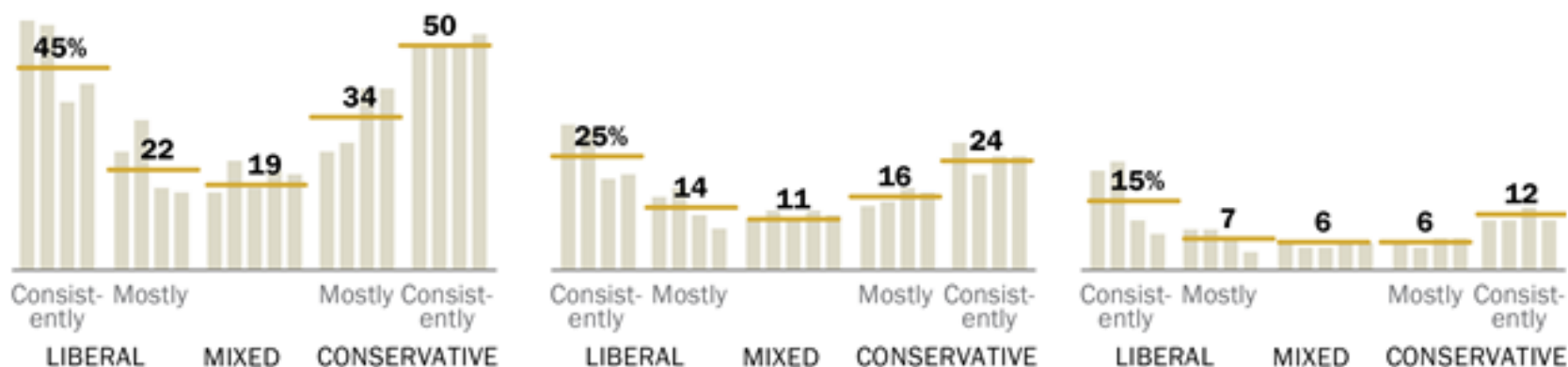
**Contacted an
elected official**



**Attended a
campaign event**



**Worked or volunteered for
a candidate or campaign**



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Note: Bars represent the level of participation at each point on a 10 question scale of ideological consistency. Figures are reported on the five ideological consistency groups used throughout the report (see Appendix A).

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Polarization has also increased through:

- **People moving to a politically friendly area and joining community and religious groups that fit their political affiliation.**
- **Political influences on choices regarding romantic partners, who then reinforce each other.**
- **Friendship networks increasingly homogeneous**

Potential cause #7: by the 21st century, elite and mass polarization were fueling each other. A more polarized public feeds back into creating more polarized candidates and officeholders.