The Dream Fulfilled? Congressional Parties

50 Years After the APSA Report

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In their 1950 APSA report "Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System," a group of eminent political scientists called for parties that "are able to bring forth programs to which they commit themselves and… [that] possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs" (APSA 1950, 1). When they decried the state of affairs where "either major party, when in power, is ill-equipped to organize its members in the legislative and executive branches into a government held together and guided by the party program" (APSA 1950, v), the authors were certainly thinking of the congressional parties. Their recommendations for change make clear what specifically they saw as the primary problems internal to Congress. Arguing that "action within Congress can be of decisive significance" (APSA 1950, 7), they advocated strengthening the party organization in Congress, making committee leaders, then chosen solely on the basis of seniority, accountable to their party, and vesting control of legislative scheduling in the majority party. Nevertheless Schattschneider and his colleagues were very much aware that "a higher degree of party responsibility cannot be provided merely by actions taken within Congress" (APSA 1950, 7); "the basis of party operations in Congress is laid in the electoral process," they wrote (APSA 1950, 56).

Congressional parties at the beginning of the 21st century have changed enormously from the parties of mid-century. They are more elaborately organized; their memberships are more cohesive; party leaders are stronger, especially in the House, and committee leaders more accountable to their party colleagues; the congressional parties and their leaders are more engaged in policy- and program-related endeavors, including efforts to set the agenda and to shape debate on the national stage. So has the dream of the APSA report's authors been fulfilled?

In this essay, I trace the development of the congressional parties over the last half century. I then assess whether the changes in the congressional parties have contributed to producing the sort of democratic, responsible and effective party system the APSA report advocated.

Congressional Parties in the 1950s

U.S. parties, it can be argued, had their origins in Congress (Aldrich 1995). Certainly since early in their history, the House of Representatives and the Senate have relied on parties and committees to provide the structure that enables them to get their work done. Parties organize the chambers and provide coordination; committees do most of the substantive work on legislation. However, the strength of the congressional parties and the extent to which they play a significant policy role has varied over time. The strength of the congressional party, most scholars believe, is largely but not exclusively a function of the homogeneity of the party members' constituencies (Cooper and Brady 1981). Similar constituencies, it is argued, translate into similar legislative preferences on the part of members.

At the time the APSA report was written the Democratic party, the clear majority party in the country, was split along regional lines into a mostly conservative southern wing and a more liberal northern wing. Presidential candidates were drawn from the North; the congressional party was dominated by southern conservatives.

In the House of Representatives, majoritarian rules and the combining within the speakership of the positions of top party leader and presiding officer provided the potential for strong party leadership. However, in the aftermath of the revolt against Speaker Cannon earlier in the century, which was itself the product of a split within the

then dominant Republican party, the speakership had been weakened. The Speaker was stripped of his powers to make committee assignments, to choose committee chairs, and to chair and control the Rules Committee. Seniority came to be the sole criterion for the designation of committee chairs, with committee chairmanships automatically going to the majority party member with the most seniority on the committee. As a result, committee chairs were no longer dependent on their party for their positions and became independently powerful.

In the 1950s, southern conservatives were disproportionately likely to hold committee chairmanships. Coming from the one party South, southerners could more easily amass the necessary seniority than could their northern colleagues. Lacking any mechanism for holding the committees and their chairs responsible to the party, party leaders coordinated and cajoled, but played little policy role. The Rules Committee, which determines the flow of legislation to the floor, was also independent and in the hands of a bipartisan conservative coalition, so majority party leaders did not even have firm control over legislative floor scheduling.

The House parties were not elaborately organized and Speaker Sam Rayburn made little use of what organization there was. The Democratic Caucus met only at the beginning of each congress, largely to ratify decisions made elsewhere. Rayburn did not want to provide a forum for the warring party factions to confront each other. Rayburn seldom use the whip system; it consisted of about 18 regionally chosen whips, not all of whom could be counted on to support the leadership's or the party majority's position.

The Senate parties were even less elaborately organized and the majority leader lacked even the powers that derive from being the chamber's presiding officer. The party

caucuses had long existed as organizations but the formally elected position of party leader dated only from the early 20th century (Gamm and Smith 1999). As in the House, committee chairs were selected on the basis of seniority alone and were independently powerful. Committee chairmanships and other committee positions of influence, such as Appropriations Committee subcommittee chairmanships and seats on the most desirable committees, were held disproportionately by conservative southern Democrats. With two successive Democratic leaders defeated at the polls, that position had sunk in prestige when a junior Lyndon Johnson assumed it. Johnson was far more vigorous and influential than his predecessors (or his immediate successor) but he acted primarily as a broker not as a policy leader. Like Rayburn, he avoided calling meetings of the Democratic caucus and he largely deferred to the committee chairs.

In neither chamber did the majority party membership as an entity or its leadership involved themselves in agenda setting or in policy formulation. The committees performed these functions largely independent of internal party direction. The president often set the agenda and attempted to shape legislation; but even if he was of the same party as the chamber majority, the committees were not bound to be responsive to his wishes.

Forces for and Routes of Change

Throughout the 1950s, liberal Democrats in both houses were discontented with this state of affairs; both policy and participation concerns were at issue (Bolling 1965). Liberals complained that no attempt was made even to ascertain whether a party position could be reached but that instead determining policy was left solely to the committees. They contended that senior committee leaders and the memberships of the most

important committees were unrepresentatively conservative. They objected that even when liberal legislation was reported from a substantive committee in the House, it was likely to be blocked or watered down by the very conservative Rules Committee. Liberals were also unhappy with the limited opportunities to participate meaningfully in the legislative process that they as mostly junior members were afforded. A lack of sufficient staff and a maldistribution of desirable committee positions were sources of discontent in both chambers. In the House, liberals also complained about autocratic committee chairs; in the Senate they chafed under Senate "folkways" which restricted their full participation (Matthews 1960; Foley 1980; Huitt 1961).

Until 1959, liberals lacked the numbers to do much more than complain. The 1958 elections, however, brought in significant reinforcements. Democrats picked up 49 seats in the House and 15 in the Senate. Most of these new members were liberals from competitive northern states and districts. In the House, these new members swelled the ranks of the recently formed reform organization, the Democratic Study Group (DSG). In the Senate, the sheer size of the freshman class swept away the apprenticeship norm dictating limited participation by junior members; these senators from competitive states, many of whom had defeated incumbents, could not afford to wait to make their mark and their party colleagues had no interested in endangering their eventual reelection by trying to force them to do so (Rohde et al 1985). In terms of policy outputs, however, the 86th Congress (1959-60) was a bitter disappointment to liberals. Despite the liberals' augmented numbers, conservatives still managed to stymie the enactment of most of the legislation liberals advocated (Sundquist ; Sinclair 1982).

Although in retrospect the 1958 elections signaled the beginning of major changes in the composition of the congressional Democratic party, the 1960 elections, in which Democrats lost 22 House seats, obscured the trend. The election of John Kennedy as president confronted Democrats with a crisis. Given the distribution of influence in the House of Representatives, Democrats might well be incapable of even bringing much of the new president's program to the floor for a vote. The young Democratic president who had promised to get the country moving again might be stymied by the Rules Committee in a chamber supposedly controlled by his own party. The DSG and the administration persuaded Rayburn that something had to be done. After a tough fight, the House agreed—by a 217-212 vote-- to Rayburn's plan to increase the size of the Rules Committee, enabling the majority party to add several usually loyal national Democrats to the committee.

The regional and ideological split continued to create problems for Democrats at the national level, thwarting enactment of much of Kennedy's program during his three years in office. Lyndon Johnson's masterful use of public sentiment in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination and then the huge Democratic majorities in the 89th Congress (1965-66) and the mandate they conveyed resulted in a burst of nonincremental policy change. Most of the liberal agenda developed during the late 1940s and the 1950s was enacted and much else besides. Yet, even during the height of the Great Society, congressional Democrats often split along regional lines. After the 1966 elections reduced the size of the Democratic congressional majorities, the intra-party divisions again severely hindered policy making. The issues that had come to the fore during the

1960s—civil rights and environmental protection and then Vietnam—actually split Democrats more deeply than the preeminent issues of the 1950s had (Sinclair 1982).

In the House, no significant internal reforms were instituted during the 1960s. The Senate, in contrast, was beginning to change. Because a two-thirds vote is needed to change Senate rules (that is, to cut off debate and bring a proposed rules change to a vote), altering Senate rules is considerably harder than changing House rules where only a simply majority is required. During the 1950s and 1960s, Senate liberals made frequent attempts to change Rule 22, the cloture rule, but always failed—stymied by the very rule they were trying to alter. However, in the Senate major change can occur without changes in rules. Senate rules concerning floor debate and amendments are highly permissive and the Senate depended on informal norms to restrain its members from exploiting their prerogatives fully.

When a transformation in the political environment altered the costs and benefits to senators of abiding by the norms, senators changed their behavior and thereby how their chamber operates. New issues, an enormous growth in the number of groups active in Washington, and the greater role of the media in politics resulted in senators being highly sought after as champions of groups' causes and made the role of outward-looking policy entrepreneur available to more senators. Successfully playing that role brought a senator a Washington reputation as a player, media attention and possibly even a shot at the presidency. Thus an activist style based on a full exploitation of Senate prerogatives became attractive to more and more senators (Sinclair 1989). To enable themselves to take full advantage of these opportunities, senators expanded the number of positions on good committees and the number of subcommittee leadership positions and distributed

them much more broadly. They increased staff numbers and made more staff available to junior as well as senior senators. Senators were thereby able to involve themselves in a much broader range of issues and they did so. Senators became much more active on the Senate floor, offering more amendments and to a wider range of bills. They exploited extended debate to a much greater extent and the frequency of filibusters shot up (Sinclair 1989, 1997; Beth 1995; Binder and Smith 1997). The media became an increasingly important arena for participation and a significant resource for senators in the pursuit of their policy, power and reelection goals.

Thus, in response to the new political environment, the Senate transformed itself from an inward-looking, committee- and seniority-dominated institution in which influence and resources were highly unequally distributed to an individualist, outward-looking institution with a much more equal distribution of resources. In neither the old nor the new Senate did party play a major role. Policy concerns had motivated liberal reformers, but did not lead them to strengthening party organs or the powers of the party leadership.

In the House the story was different, though at first it seemed that the result would not be. Like their Senate counterparts, House reformers were motivated by both policy and participation goals. However, in the House unlike the Senate, rules changes were necessary but, because they only required a majority vote, they were also considerably easier to bring about. In fact, many of the issues reformers wanted to address were controlled by party rather than chamber rules and customs. Since reformers were a larger proportion of the Democratic than of the full House membership, their chances of success were greater within the party.

In 1969 reformers won regular meetings of the House Democratic Caucus and thereby established the caucus as a forum for further reform efforts. Over the following six years, a spate of rules changes—some House but mostly Democratic party rules changes—were instituted.

The requirement that committee chairmen and the chairmen of Appropriations subcommittees win majority approval in the Democratic Caucus was intended to make them responsive to the party majority which was now clearly a liberal majority. The provision for regular meetings of the Democratic Caucus provided a forum in which rank and file members could inform Democratic committee contingents of their views and a few instances of the Caucus instructing committees put committees on notice that they had better listen to strongly-held Caucus sentiments.

Policy and responsiveness motives also underlay the shifting of the committee assignment function from the Ways and Means Democrats to a new Steering and Policy Committee chaired by the Speaker. Ways and Means Democrats were seen as too conservative and not accountable to the party. The Steering and Policy Committee was designed to be both representative and responsive, its membership a combination of members elected from regional groups, elected party leaders and leadership appointees.

Granting the Speaker the right to nominate all Democratic members and the chair of the Rules Committee subject only to ratification by the Caucus was clearly intended to give the leadership true control over the scheduling of legislation for the floor. By making Rules Democrats dependent upon the Speaker for their position on the committee, reformers made the committee an arm of the leadership.

A series of rules changes, some principally aimed at expanding participation opportunities, others also motivated by policy concerns, had the effect of increasing opportunities and incentives for participation in committee and on the floor. In an effort to spread positions of influence, members were limited to chairing no more than one subcommittee each. The subcommittee bill of rights removed from committee chairs the power to appoint subcommittee chairs and gave it to the Democratic caucus of the committee; it guaranteed subcommittees automatic referral of legislation and adequate budget and staff. The supply of resources available to the House and its members, most importantly staff, was expanded and distributed much more broadly among members. The institution of the recorded teller vote in the Committee of the Whole changed the dynamics of the floor stage, increasing the incentives for offering amendments and often for opposing the committee's position. Sunshine reforms opened up most committee mark-ups and conference committee meetings to the media and the public, encouraging members to use those forums for grandstanding as well as for policy entrepreneurship.

The same alterations in the political environment that led to the individualist Senate also made the free lance entrepreneurial style popular with House members. However, the payoffs of the style were less for members of the House; they were less able to establish a national reputation beyond the Washington policy community and certainly less likely to be perceived as possible presidential nominees. Furthermore, the costs were greater. House reformers had believed that their participation and policy goals were compatible; the changes they instituted would, they believed, produce better policy and provide greater opportunities for the rank and file to participate in the legislative process. However, by the mid-1970s, increased participation by rank and file members and large

numbers of inexperienced subcommittee chairmen had multiplied the number of significant actors and radically increased uncertainty. Floor sessions stretched on interminably, compromises worked out in now more representative committees were picked apart on the floor, and Democrats were forced to go on the record on political touchy amendments over and over again. To further their goals within this environment, Democratic committee contingents, Democratic committee leaders and the Democratic membership needed help and looked to the party leadership to provide it.

In response, the party leaders began to make greater use of the tools and resources the reforms had given them. When the hostile political climate of the 1980s made it still more difficult for Democrats to advance their policy goals and threatened their reelection goals as well, members not only allowed but began to demand that their leaders aggressively employ the tools at their command to facilitate passing the legislation members wanted. The leadership responded and, by the late 1980s, the political party had become much more central to the policy process in the House (Sinclair 1995; Rohde 1991). The majority party leadership involved itself actively in all phases of the legislative process. Furthermore, as members came to believe that success in the policy and electoral struggle depends on effective participation in national discourse, leaders took an increasingly active part in setting the agenda and disseminating a party message.

The House Democratic party's increasing ideological homogeneity made these developments possible. The change in southern politics that the civil rights movement and the Voting Rights Act set off had, by the early 1980s, resulted in a less conservative southern Democratic House contingent. As African-Americans became able to vote and as more conservative whites increasingly voted Republican, the supportive electoral

coalitions of southern Democrats began to look similar to those of their northern party colleagues. As a result, the legislative preferences of northern and southern Democrats became less disparate.

The Republican party also changed, becoming more aggressively conservative in the 1980s. Not only were fewer moderates being elected to the House, more hard-edged, ideological conservatives were entering the chamber. The increasing proportion of House Republicans elected from the South accounted for some but far from all of this change in the party's ideological cast.

House voting polarized along party lines. In the 1970s, only 37 percent of all roll calls pitted a majority of Democrats against a majority of Republicans; 50 percent of roll calls were such party votes in the 1980s and 58 percent in the 1990s.

With the parties increasingly ideologically polarized and an activist Democratic majority party leadership leading a relatively homogeneous membership, the minority Republicans were increasingly relegated to the sidelines. To be sure, on many lesser issues the House still operated in a bipartisan fashion and Republicans could often influence legislation in committee. However, on most high profile issues, the action took place within the majority party. Their irrelevance rankled Republicans and a bitter partisanship became the norm on the House floor (Cheney 1989; Connelly and Pitney 1994).

During the 1980s and early 1990s, House Republicans had in many instances imitated House Democrats by adopting rules that decreased the autonomy of their committee leaders and strengthened their party leadership. Committee leaders were made subject to a secret ballot ratification vote in the Republican Conference, the organization

of all House Republicans; the Republican party leader was given the power to nominate Republican members of Rules and more say on the party committee that makes committee assignments. Thus, while they were still in the minority, Republicans had augmented the tools available to their party leadership.

When Republicans won control of the House and Newt Gingrich became Speaker, political parties in the House were a far cry from the loosely-organized and weakly-led parties of the 1950s. Extraordinary political circumstances allowed Gingrich and the Republican party to play an unusually aggressive policy role in the 104th Congress, but this represented an accentuation of an already well developed trend (Sinclair 1995, 1999).

The same changes in the political context that altered the character of the political parties in the House affected the Senate as well. Partisan realignment in the South led to conservative southern Democrats being replaced by even more conservative southern Republicans. As a result, the Senate Democratic party became more homogeneously moderate to liberal and the Republican party more conservative. Outside the South as well, as Republican candidates and activists were becoming more ideologically conservative, so were new Republican senators. By the late 1980s these changes were translating into greater party voting cohesion in the Senate; 58 percent of Senate roll calls were party votes in the 1990s up from 42 percent in the 1970s and 44 for the entire decade of the 1980s.

Over the previous two decades, the Senate and its parties had instituted some reforms. In 1975, the Senate changed the cloture rule to reduce the vote required to cut off debate from two-thirds of those present and voting to three-fifths of the total membership (usually 60). The Senate parties, like their House counterparts, had made

committee leaders more responsive to their party memberships by requiring member approval votes not just seniority. With the increase in intraparty ideological homogeneity and interparty polarization, senators elaborated their party organizations and became more willing to work with and through their party. However, unlike their House colleagues, senators did not give their party leaders significant new powers. Empowering their leaders to control the flow of legislation to and on the floor the way House majority party leaders do would mean significantly limiting their own prerogatives, and that senators have not been willing to do.

Congressional Parties at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Congressional parties at the beginning of the 21st century are very different from the parties the APSA report critiqued. They are more cohesive, more elaborately organized and much more engaged in policy and program-related endeavors.

Congressional Party Cohesion

In both House and Senate, voting now falls heavily along party lines. As Figure 1 shows, the difference between how Democrats and how Republicans vote on recorded floor votes is considerably greater now than at any time in the last half century.[1] This partisan polarization is evident at the committee stage as well; committee deliberations on major legislation are less likely to be bipartisan and more likely to be sharply partisan than they used to be. The committee was partisan on 46 percent of major measures in the House and 27 percent in the Senate during the 1993-1998 period compared with 20

[1] Congressional Quarterly party unity scores adjusted for absences are the measure used. The formula for party difference is Dem score –(100-Rep score).

percent in the House and 12 percent in the Senate for three selected congresses during the 1970s and 1980s[2] (Sinclair 2000a).

Organization and Participation

Both parties in both chambers are now more elaborately organized and much more active than their counterparts of fifty years ago. The various party organs as well as the leaders' offices are professionally and quite generously staffed. The congressional parties and their leaderships are not, however, rigidly hierarchical or highly directive; they are, rather, inclusive and participatory. Members can now pursue both their policy and their participation goals-- House members often most effectively-- through the party and with the help of its leadership; as a result, the congressional party has become more central to members' congressional lives.

In the House, the Democratic Caucus and the Republican Conference are now active organizations that meet at least weekly. Each party elects a number of leaders—a Speaker designate, a floor leader, a chief whip, a caucus (or conference) chair and vice-chair—and appoints a number more— various sorts of deputy and assistant whips, the chairs of some party committees. Party committees are charged with a variety of tasks. Both parties, of course, have a committee on committees that assigns members to legislative committees; on both sides of the aisle, party leaders chair and play an influential role in the assignment process. Both have policy committees charged with the discussion and dissemination of party policy positions. Both have active and professional campaign committees.

The contemporary party whip systems in the House, number in the scores. In the 106th Congress (1999-2000), the Republican whip system consisted of 15 deputy whips

[2] 91st (1969-70), 97th (1981-82), 101st (1989-90).

and 44 assistant whips; the Democratic whip system consisted of 13 deputy whips, 41 at large whips and 20 regional whips. The whip systems are charged with ascertaining the voting intentions of the party's members on important legislation and, when necessary, with persuading members to vote for the party position. Each meets weekly and, in addition, subgroups meet as vote mobilization efforts dictate.

In addition to these permanent entities, both House parties use ad hoc task forces or working groups to perform a variety of tasks that range from whipping to policy development to outreach beyond Congress.

Although the Senate parties are considerably smaller, they too have elaborated and activated their organization in recent years. Democrats and Republicans each meet in closed session for lunch on Tuesday under the aegis of their policy committees. Democrats who traditionally concentrated the chairmanships of their various party organs in their Leader have devolved some of these positions and more senators hold party leadership positions. The Steering and Coordination Committee and the Technology and Communications Committee have both been spun off and have their own chairs. The Democratic and Republican whip systems have increased in size and become more active. The campaign committees have become highly professionalized. Like their House counterparts, the Senate parties sometimes designate ad hoc task forces of members to develop policy or to publicize party positions.

Their more elaborate organization and staffing make the congressional parties capable of engaging in the broad range of activities that are now the norm. Moreover, the form that the organization and activity takes promotes the communication and participation that are essential to party maintenance in the contemporary Congress. In

neither chamber are members willing to be simple followers in a hierarchically-structured party. The contemporary parties offer multiple opportunities for members to communicate with their leaders. Conference and caucus meetings and whip meetings, for example, allow members to convey their views and concerns directly to their leaders and provide a forum in which members can hold their leaders accountable. For their part, the leaders gain valuable information from such contact with their members. In the bigger House where the problem of communication is more troublesome, leaders continually seek additional ways of ”closing the loop” of communication between members and leaders. Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt, for example, meets daily with a “leadership” group that consists of 50 to 60 people of whom about 30 to 35 show up on any given day. “They’re kind of mini caucuses, and the purpose is communication,” an aide explained. “Gephardt wants to hear what all the factions are saying, and he wants to be able to convey information too.” A leadership council to which each of the factions elect a representative meets once a week.

Contemporary members of Congress expect their leaders to consult them and keep them informed. In addition, members want opportunities to participate meaningfully in the legislative process. In the House, the sort of free lance entrepreneurship characteristic of the 1970s became much less feasible for members as the majority leadership strengthened its control. Party-bases activities provided new avenues for member participation, ones that help rather than hurt the party effort.

Partisan polarization also made participation through their parties more attractive to senators than it was when the parties were more heterogeneous and the ideological distance between them less. Recent Senate party leaders have sought to provide more

channels for members to participate in and through the party. Still, individual senators exercise a great deal more discretion about when and under what conditions to participate on the party team than House members do; they have available attractive alternative channels for participation and they pay little price when they go off on their own.

Legislative Coordination and the Mobilization of Floor Majorities

Majority party leaders have long been charged with legislative coordination, especially through the scheduling of legislation for floor consideration, and with the mobilization of majorities for major legislation at the floor stage. Contemporary House leaders are more capable of carrying out these and attendant tasks effectively than their predecessors were because they command greater resources for doing so and, even more important, their members' expectations support an activist leadership role. The Senate's nonmajoritarian rules continue to hinder Senate majority party leaders despite some change in their members' expectations.

The House majority party leadership has controlled the floor schedule since the Speaker was given the power to name the majority party members of the Rules Committee. During the 1980s the leadership developed special rules from the Rules Committee into powerful and flexible tools for managing floor time, focusing debate and sometimes advantaging one outcome over others. The House majority party whether Democratic or Republican routinely brings major legislation to the floor under rules that restrict amendments. During the period 1993-98, on average 61 percent of all rules and 79 percent of rules for major legislation were restrictive (Sinclair 2000b) A rule must be able to garner a majority vote on the House floor. By and large, restrictive rules now pass on party-line votes and the majority party leadership seldom looses a rule vote.

The parties' large, well-staffed whip systems make vote mobilization efforts on a nearly continuous basis possible. Given the number of whips, not all need be involved in every effort. The large size of the group thus allows flexibility and guards against burn out. For refining the initial whip count and for persuasion, Democrats rely on a volunteer subset of whips, which, of course, consists of those most interested in the legislation at issue. On both sides of the aisle, less senior members tend to be more active as whips. They have fewer other demands on their time and participation in whip efforts gives them a welcome opportunity to be in the thick of the action. They are backed up by experienced professional staffs as well as by the veteran top echelons of the whip system itself.

Both parties work with allied interest groups in their vote mobilization efforts. The top leaders all have aides charged with the task of activating and coordinating the efforts of such groups. During the 104th and 105th Congresses (1995-98), the Thursday Group, a leadership-created entity consisting of lobbyists for both the ideological groups closely allied with the Republican party and for business groups with a major stake in the enactment of the Republican agenda, met weekly with then Republican Conference Chair John Boehner. He and Whip Tom DeLay worked to orchestrate these groups' lobbying efforts and to coordinate them with the internal whip campaign (Balz and Brownstein 1996, 198-199).

In their legislative scheduling and vote mobilization efforts, the party leaders act as agents for their members on whose votes they are dependent for their leadership positions. Party leaders are in the business of facilitating the passage of legislation that

furthers their members' policy and reelection goals. That now often requires that leaders involve themselves earlier in the legislative process.

Congressional reforms had made committee leaders dependent on their parties for their positions and thus subject to influence from their party caucuses. The reforms, the difficult political environment of the 1980s and 1990s and the very narrow margins of control of the latter 1990s all made passing legislation majority party members wanted difficult.

When committees are unable to put together major legislation that can both pass on the House floor and is satisfactory to most majority party members, leaders often coordinate or even craft necessary compromises either in committee or after legislation is reported out of committee. When a committee is not sufficiently responsive to the party majority, it falls to the leaders to pressure committee members to become so. Occasionally the leadership uses special task forces to draft legislative language on an issue considered too politically delicate for the committee of jurisdiction to handle. In 1999, for example, the relevant committees could not report out a managed care reform bill satisfactory to most Republicans. The Speaker then entrusted the job to a task force. Leaders can play such an assertive policy role because they do so as agents of a relatively homogeneous party membership. When the party leadership represents the membership, committee leaders know they must be responsive. The strong support of his membership made Speaker Gingrich's highly directive role vis-à-vis the committees in 1995 possible (Owens 1998; Aldrich and Rohde 1997).

Senate leaders also involve themselves in the policy process as agents of their members; they spend a great deal of their time attempting to work out differences among

senators through direct negotiation or by facilitating negotiations. Senate committee leaders too are aware that they must be responsive to the members of their party. Thus as the new chair of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee in the 106th Congress, moderate Republican Jim Jeffords has been extremely solicitous of the much more conservative Republican Senate membership. On the patient's bill of rights issue, for example, Jeffords participated in a leadership-appointed all-Republican task force to draft legislation and then passed that out of his committee unchanged (Sinclair 2000b, Chapter 8).

The Senate Majority Leader lacks the control over the flow of legislation to and on the floor that the House Speaker possesses. Extended debate and the Senate's permissive amending rules mean that the Senate Majority Leader cannot keep off the floor issues his members would rather avoid nor pass legislation they want with a simple majority. Thus the most basic precondition to party government—control over the legislative schedule—is thwarted by the chamber's rules.

Setting the Agenda and Promoting a Party Message

Setting the agenda and disseminating a party message are now central functions of congressional parties and their leaders. Members believe success in the policy and electoral struggle depends on effective participation in national discourse. Given his advantages of visibility, media access and stature, the president will shape the debate to his advantage and dominate agenda setting unless confronted by an organized opposition effort. During the 1980s, President Reagan taught Democrats that defining issues and party images to one's benefit was both possibility and important and that competing as individuals with a media-savvy president was a loosing strategy. Furthermore, partisan

and ideological polarization and the suffusion of the political arena by news media with a negative bias and a voracious appetite for conflict lead to a more conflictual politics that is played out much more on the public stage, often with audience reactions determining who wins and who looses. Within such an environment, political actors adept at using the media to push their issues to the center of the agenda and to frame the debate to favor their position are greatly advantaged; yielding the public forum to one's opponents is a recipe for policy and electoral defeat.

The congressional parties now generate agendas intended to serve both policy and electoral ends. They work systematically to disseminate party messages and to attempt to frame debate to their advantage. To that end, they have developed sophisticated structures and procedures. In both chambers and both parties, the effort is highly inclusive and predicated on broad participation by members.

The "Contract with America" is the best know instance of congressional party agenda setting. The Contract was an innovation in that no congressional leader had previously made an agenda the centerpiece of a nationalized congressional campaign. Previous congressional leaders had, however, developed agendas to guide legislative action and to enhance the credit their party could claim from legislative productivity. Most notably, Speaker Jim Wright in 1987 at the beginning of the 100th Congress had proposed an agenda consisting of issues such as clean water legislation, a highway bill and aid to the homeless that were broadly supported within the Democratic party. He relentlessly kept the spotlight on those items and used leadership resources aggressively to facilitate their passage. By the end of the Congress, all the items had become law and the Democratic Congress had gained considerable favorable publicity. Thereafter

Democrats expected their to Speaker to engaged in agenda setting activities. Tom Foley, who succeeded Wright as Speaker, did so but considerably more cautiously and, as a result, was often criticized by his members.

Both parties in both chambers now generate and publicize party agendas each congress and often update them every year. Under the heading "The Republican Common Sense Agenda," Speaker Hastert's website states "Speaker J. Dennis Hastert has reserved the first ten House bill numbers for the top Republican legislative priorities including improving education, saving Social Security, cutting taxes, and shoring up our national defense. Check back here to keep track of the progress of the Republican Common Sense Agenda." The ten bills and their status are then listed. Other House Republican leadership sites promote the agenda as well.

Senate Republicans have a similar but not identical agenda that they introduced at the beginning of the 106th Congress as S1 to S5 as has now become customary. In 1997 Senate Republicans put into effect a rule allowing for the adoption of a Senate GOP agenda in the Conference by a three-quarters vote. That rule has been construed as requiring an agenda and what was an informal process has now become formalized.

With Democrats holding the White House, Senate Democrats, House Democrats and the president have coordinated their efforts in recent years and have agreed upon a joint agenda. The "Families First: 2000 Democratic Agenda", emphasizing protecting social security and Medicare, improving education and enacting a patients' bill of rights, is an update of their 1999 agenda and was unveiled early in 2000.

These agendas are intended to serve both legislative and electoral purposes. Projecting a positive image of the party that will help in the next election is always a

central concern in putting an agenda together; still most party members would like to pass the measures included. No member is bound to vote for the component measures, but the agendas are constructed to include only measures broadly supported by the party membership. The actual likelihood that included measures will be enacted—or even that members will be required to vote on them-- depends upon the political context; the congressional minority party has considerably less chance of passing its agenda items, and thus may actually have an easier time agreeing on an agenda. With a hostile opposition party president in the White House, the congressional majority may be stymied as well and thus put more emphasis on the electoral rather than on the immediate legislative function of the agenda.

Constructing the party agenda is an inclusive enterprise, in which broad participation is stressed. The putting together of the Contract with America exemplifies the process (Koopman 1996,142-47; Stid 1996, 6-8). In late 1993, Newt Gingrich, then House minority whip, began to talk about holding a Capitol steps event during the 1994 election campaign. At the House Republicans' retreat in Salisbury, Maryland in February 1994, members held intensive discussions in small groups and took the first steps towards identifying the common principles and core beliefs that would guide the drafting of the Contract. Republican incumbents and challengers were surveyed about what should be included. Leaders insisted that issues that seriously divided Republicans be excluded. Working groups of members and leadership staff then put together the actual bills. Any member who wanted to could participate, but younger activists were more likely to do so than senior committee leaders. Still a large number of members did have a hand in putting together the Contract and so felt some pride of authorship. “By the time things got

to the [Republican] conference, there was a great deal of buy-in already," Peter Hoekstra (R-MI), an activist member of the class of 1992, reported. "The members involved in the drafting had a great sense of empowerment and that began to run through the conference." (Stid 1996,7).

Although more elaborate than the norm, the process of putting together the Contract is typical in the use of the party retreats and of working groups or task forces of members and in the emphasis on broad participation.

The parties have developed multifaceted and quite sophisticated means of promoting their agendas and disseminating their party message. They have become adept at orchestrating special events to garner press coverage. Of course, the president's party has an advantage. In recent years, the president's State of the Union address has provided the most highly visible forum for publicizing the Democrats' joint agenda. Democrats have staged many other events to highlight their proposals as well. Thus, in early 2000, they staged a rally attended by the president, vice president, House and Senate Democratic leaders, 100 House members and 20 senators (Lipinski 1999, 12). In 1999, Republicans concerned about the effect of impeachment on their party image made an especially elaborate effort to promote their agenda with the public. Senate Majority leader Trent Lott appointed five working groups—each chaired by two senators-- on the five top GOP legislative goals—tax cuts, drugs, education reform, restructuring Social Security and national defense (Roll Call 2/8/ 1999). Their charge was to map communications strategy to highlight the Republican positions, through press conferences, speeches, town hall meetings and other events. Once the impeachment trial finished, Senate Republicans launched a 60-day media blitz that included a number of

appearances by Lott at rallies and town hall meetings around the country. Altogether 150 town meetings were planned, most featuring the Republican senator or senators from the state where they were held. (Congressional Quarterly Weekly 2/20/1999, 424, 3/20/1999, 686).

The parties' day-to-day message operations depend on well-staffed and equipped party entities under the auspices of the party leadership and on broad participation by the membership (Lipinski 1999 ; Sellers 1999). The House and Senate Republican parties vest primary communications responsibility in the Conference organizations; the Democrats in both chambers rely upon their policy committees, the staffs of which are controlled by the Democratic leader in the chamber. All four entities have a sizeable staff of professionals. They collect and disseminate information useful to members in a variety of forms. The Senate Democratic Policy Committee, for example, produces the Daily Report, which reviews recent Senate developments and describes upcoming floor action, briefs on specific issues and pieces of legislation, and fact sheets on Democratic positions and proposals. House Republican Conference's publications include FloorPrep which summarizes legislation and amendments scheduled for floor consideration each day, Legislative Digest which provides in-depth analysis of legislation scheduled for floor consideration each week, including bill highlights, background information, cost estimates, arguments for and against controversial measures, and other relevant information and Daily Briefing, which displays the "message of the day" and summarizes in chart form what is happening in national politics.

The information these organs provide are, of course, a service to members. They are also aimed at encouraging members "to sing from the same hymn book." The

"message of the day" is often prominently displayed and the arguments most favorable to the party's position are emphasized, often in the form of "talking points"; the hope is that members will used these messages in their contacts with the media. Various party organs also facilitate member media contact activities. The Democratic Technology and Communications Committee has television studios, extensive video editing capabilities, and facilities for satellite hookups with local television stations that senators can use; the staff helps senators organize media events by doing everything from contacting reporters and selling them the story to reserving the room (Sellers 1999). The Senate Republican leadership provides similar services for its members through the Republican Conference.

In the House, both parties have institutionalized an important facet of their member-based message activities. House Democrats have a Message Group consisting of party leaders and particularly media savvy members who meet daily to agree upon a message of the day; a larger group of members is charged with disseminating the message, especially through the one-minute speeches that begin the House's legislative day. The House Republican "Theme Team" performs a function similar to the larger Democratic group; made up of 50 members, it is responsible for "communicating the majority party's legislative issues, plans and ideas… during speeches given on the House floor" (House Republican Conference website).

Congressional majority parties can use their control over the floor agenda to promote their message and that is an important strategy for majorities. In 2000, the House Republican strategy entailed passing as separate bills the most popular parts of the 1999 tax legislation which Clinton had vetoed. After passing repeal of the "marriage penalty,"

House Republicans were reported to be "ecstatic" with the press coverage, which they had worked hard to garner (Roll Call 2/14/2000).

House rules give the minority little leverage so their message activities perforce rely less on legislative maneuvers. Nevertheless, the extremely narrow party margin in the 106th Congress encouraged the Democratic minority to use discharge petitions to try to force their issues to the floor. Although no discharge petition has gotten the 218 signatures necessary to force floor action, the threat of success seems to have played an important part in the Republican leadership's decision to schedule the "patient's bill of rights" legislation (Sinclair 2000b, Chapter 8).

Senate rules, in contrast, give the minority a great deal of leverage and, in the 1990s, exploiting Senate prerogatives to attempt to seize agenda control from the majority party became a key minority party strategy. The lack of a germaneness requirement for amendments to most bills severely weakens the majority party's ability to control the floor agenda. If the Majority Leader refuses to bring a bill to the floor, its supporters can offer it as an amendment to most legislation the Leader does bring to the floor.[3] The Leader can, of course, file a cloture petition and try to shut off debate, but he needs 60 votes to do so. In 1996 Senate Democrats used this strategy to enact a minimum wage increase and, since then, they have force highly visible floor debate on tobacco regulation, campaign finance reform, gun control and managed care reform, all issues the majority party would have preferred to avoid. These procedural strategies have been

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[3] The Majority Leader can make a motion to table the amendment, which is nondebatable. That does, however, require his members to vote on the issue, albeit in a procedural guise, and the Leader may want to avoid that. Furthermore, even after the minority's amendment has been tabled, the minority can continue to offer other amendments, including even individual parts of the original amendment, and can block a vote on the underlying bill the majority party wants to pass.

accompanied by sophisticated public relations campaigns so as to garner as much favorable publicity as possible.

The Dream Fulfilled?

How would Schattschneider and colleagues assess the contemporary congressional parties? Would they see significant progress towards a dream fulfilled? Or would the dream now look more like a nightmare? A number of the report's specific recommendations have been instituted. In both chambers, committee chairs are no longer independent centers of power; they are now accountable to the party memberships to whom they owe their positions. The parties are more elaborately organized and more active; the report's call for more frequent meetings of party members has certainly been fulfilled. The contemporary congressional parties are stronger but also participatory and inclusive, as the report's authors seem to have hoped. In the House, the majority party leadership has gained secure control over legislative scheduling, as the report advocated. In contrast, cloture in the Senate continues to require a supermajority so the majority party leader lacks such control and depends on cooperation from the minority.

These specific recommendations were by and large seen as means to an end, not ends in themselves. More broadly, the report called for parties that "are able to bring forth programs to which they commit themselves and… [that] possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs". How do congressional parties fare on those criteria? The contemporary congressional parties are much more engaged in policy- and program-related endeavors than their 1950s predecessors. All four now regularly draft and publicize a party agenda and work to convey a coherent party message to the public. In recent years, the party holding the White House has generate an agenda which the

president and the House and Senate parties all participated in putting together and to which all then subscribed.

Presidents or presidential candidates and their congressional parties do not, however, come up with a common agenda on which to fight the election. The platforms the party conventions approve are presidential not congressional platforms. To be sure, usually some members of Congress participate in the platform-writing process; and much in the documents reflects consensus positions within the party. Yet the platform-drafting process is by no means a joint enterprise between the presidential candidate and the party's candidates for Congress. Nor do members of Congress have any formal voice in the presidential campaign from which much of the agenda and priorities of the winning candidate will emerge.

An illustrative incident occurred in 1980. During the campaign, House member Jack Kemp proposed and his junior colleague Newt Gingrich ran "Governing Team Day," an event involving presidential candidate Ronald Reagan and Republican congressional candidates on the Capitol steps pledging themselves to work together (Pitney 1988). Kemp and Gingrich had hoped to have candidates indorse specific policy stands, to in effect, have all commit themselves to and then run on a joint platform. The Reagan campaign refused and insisted on only vague campaign-style pledges. (That congressional Republicans would have signed on to something more explicit is far from clear.) The Reagan campaign wanted to maintain its flexibility, as most campaigns, congressional as well as presidential, do.

The problem, of course, is that the party's candidates for president, House and Senate face different sets of voters, voters who can and do pick and choose among

candidates of different parties across offices. Given these different electorates, the best strategies for the candidates of a party may well differ. To be sure, the issue appeals of a party's House candidates, Senate candidates and presidential candidate will mostly be quite similar. With the demise of the one-party South and of other such "artificially" one-party areas, congressional candidates in one area are unlikely to espouse a set of positions directly at odds with their party's presidential candidate or with the party's congressional candidates elsewhere. Nevertheless, many congressional candidates face electorates very different from that their party's presidential candidate confronts and they cannot depend on him to sweep them to victory; the fates of candidates for the different offices are simply not that closely linked.

The agenda of the winning presidential candidate will include much that the party's members of Congress strongly support; if he is not an incumbent, the candidate is likely to have picked up ideas from his party's congressional contingent as, for example, Clinton did in 1992 with family leave legislation. The agenda is unlikely to include much that badly splits the party, though completely avoiding such issues may be impossible. Thus Democratic presidential candidates must take a position on trade. But even if divisive issues are avoided, the new president's agenda came out of his campaign and was designed to serve his electoral needs, not those of his party's members of Congress. They had limited input and so their commitment is likely to be limited as well.

Do the congressional parties of today "possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs?". Data on voting in committee and on the floor indicate that contemporary congressional parties act quite cohesively. To be sure, neither party is an ideological monolith; within each of the four party groupings strains between more

centrist and more ideologically extreme members are evident and the differences tend to have a constituency basis. Yet compared to fifty years ago when the APSA report was written, contemporary congressional parties are much more cohesive and that cohesion is in good part a function of more homogeneous electoral coalitions within each of the parties.

Party leaders in the House of Representatives command much greater tools for engineering passage of legislation--true control over the floor schedule, powerful and flexible special rules, a large and active whip system. Leaders in both chambers provide their members with greater reelection-related help, especially funding and fund-raising help, than their predecessors did. Yet party leaders, inside or outside Congress, do not control their reelection and so cannot coerce their members into voting a certain way. Furthermore, congressional party leaders have absolutely no interest in pressuring a member to vote in a way that will result in his or her loosing the seat to a member of the other party.

The 103rd Congress, the only recent two-year period of fully unified government, illustrates the extent of and limitations on a party's ability to enact its program into law. Although only peripherally and indirectly involved in shaping the Clinton agenda, the House and Senate Democratic parties and their leaders largely embraced it (Sinclair 1996). In committee and on the floor, congressional Democrats supported Clinton's positions, which most of the time coincided with their own, at very high levels (Sinclair 2000a). The one issue that badly split congressional Democrats and divided a majority of them from their party's president was NAFTA. The demise of health care reform, certainly the Democrats' biggest failure, was not the result of ideological splits within the

party but rather of opponents' success in the battle for public opinion. Opponents' intensive campaign through the airwaves and at the grass roots raised a host of doubts about Clinton's plan; it was the altered the views of their constituents that made it impossible for Democrats to put together majorities for any significant health care bill. Members feared being blamed at election time for their failure to produce, but they feared voting for an unpopular plan even more. Senate rules also took their toll on legislative productivity in the 103rd; Republicans made good use of minority power in that chamber to extract concessions on or kill outright legislation with majority support. Their ability to do so, however, depended on their winning the PR war—as they did on Clinton's economic stimulus package, for example. When Democrats came out on top in the fight for public opinion as they did on the Brady gun control bill, Republicans could not maintain their filibuster.

The lesson that the 103rd Congress teaches is that, in attempting to enact a program of any ambitiousness, even parties that are quite ideologically homogeneous and act quite cohesively are likely to run up against barriers stemming from the structure of the U.S. national government. Senate rules pose a problem, but the more basic obstacle is an electoral system which disconnects the fates of the party's elected officials. NAFTA provides an example of the familiar circumstance of different constituencies with different stable interests leading Democrats to divergent positions and behavior. Democratic members of Congress representing rust belt districts saw NAFTA as a threat to their constituents jobs; the president representing a national constituency and Democratic members of Congress from more affluent, "new economy" districts saw it as an economic opportunity for their constituents. Seven years later in 2000, a similar

alignment appear on PNTR for China because the interests invoked were similar. The Clinton health plan case is more interesting because it did not founder on a divergence in stable constituency interests among Democrats. Rather a party coalition was disrupted by a successful PR campaign that altered public opinion. When their constituents began to express deep concern about the Clinton plan, congressional Democrats up for reelection in a few months time could not rely on the leader of their party to ensure their reelection. He did not even have to face the voters with them. Beyond raising funds, neither the president nor their chamber party leaders could do very much to help them win reelection. No wonder the party's problems in Washington and in public opinion set off an everyone-for himself-reaction.

The structure of the U. S. national government makes divided control possible and, during the second half of the 20th century, the president was of one party and the other party controlled at least one house of the Congress almost two-thirds of the time (32 of 50 years). When control of the branches is divided, partisan differences in policy views and electoral interests act as barriers to either party enacting its program. In addition, however, the president and his party's members of Congress are more likely to perceive their optimal strategies as conflicting because of their differences in status. Thus the president likely will want legislative accomplishments, while the congressional party may well see them as burnishing the reputation of the opposition congressional majority and so as a barrier to regaining majority status.

What then would the APSA Report's authors conclude? Almost certainly they would see the contemporary congressional parties as significant improvements over the highly irresponsible parties of the 1950s. Yet they would probably also be sobered by

mounting evidence that the basic structure of the U.S. government prevents the full development of responsible parties. When the electoral constituencies of a party's elected officials are relatively homogeneous, parties can and do bridge the divide across the branches and chambers, but the electoral system ensures that the structure will often be rickety and unreliable.

In recent years, observers in the academic and Washington community have concerned themselves more with questions about the potentially negative impact of high partisanship than with questions of party responsibility. Does high partisanship lead to ideological extremity? Does high partisanship lead to lower legislative productivity because true policy differences make compromise harder and/or because partisan electoral advantage is valued above legislative output? Does high partisanship lead to a shrill, nasty politics that turns off most voters? Although these questions cannot be fully explored much less answered here, they do require some attention.

To argue that high partisanship leads to ideological extremity reverses the more plausible order of causation. Furthermore, at least when the margins of chamber control are narrow, as they are now, party leaders work to mitigate extremity to the extent that it hurts the party's electoral prospects. Candidate recruitment by House leaders in recent years provides a particularly interesting example. On both sides of the aisle, leaders have worked to recruit candidates that fit the district even if that means candidates out of the mainstream of the party. Thus Democratic House leaders have persuaded fairly conservative Democrats to run in southern districts and then supported them strongly, while Republican leaders have promoted moderates in moderate districts. Of course, if member ideological extremity underlies high partisanship, members may oppose such

expedient behavior. For example, when Speaker Newt Gingrich recruited moderate California Assemblyman Firestone to run in the moderate Santa Barbara area, conservative California House Republicans rebelled and supported a conservative. The conservative won the Republican primary and lost the general election.

To the extent that true and deep policy differences underlie high partisanship, compromises will be harder to reach and the result is likely to be lower legislative productivity. Again, however, the policy differences not the high partisanship that derives therefrom seem to be the cause. Does high partisanship lead to partisan electoral advantage being valued above legislative output? Certainly the two are not always perceived as being at odds; for the party in control of a chamber or branch, legislative productivity is likely to be seen as providing electoral advantage—as was the case for congressional Republicans in 1996, for example. For the party in the minority, however, electoral advantage may well lie in having an issue not a law and, depending on chamber and chamber margins, the minority may be able to block action.

Partisan polarization does seem to have been accompanied by a nasty, ad hominem politics, by what has been labeled the politics of personal destruction. One could argue that the same forces that lead to partisan polarization also create high stakes politics. When the stakes are high, the barriers to action that the American governmental system imposes generate a high level of frustration. Combine that frustration with the more capable party organizations that partisan polarization fosters and the result is parties willing and able to do whatever it takes to increase their chances of policy and electoral success. If the media select for conflict, sensationalism and personal attack, the likely result is a politics that plays to what the media rewards with coverage.

So are we worse off than when the APSA Report was published? Is the quest for responsible parties altogether wrongheaded? The congressional parties do present a clearer policy message than they did 50 years ago and a party's candidates are much more likely to be conveying the same message. Partisan battles contain considerable issue content; the fights in Congress are policy fights over issues important to real people—managed care reform, gun control, taxes-- and a fair amount of the issue discussion does filter through to the attentive public. The congressional parties are fairly cohesive and tend to act in concert within their chamber. This may not be enough to enable the majority party to enact its program. The barriers the system erects are formidable. Yet the current system is more transparent and certainly gives the public clearer choices than that of 50 years ago.

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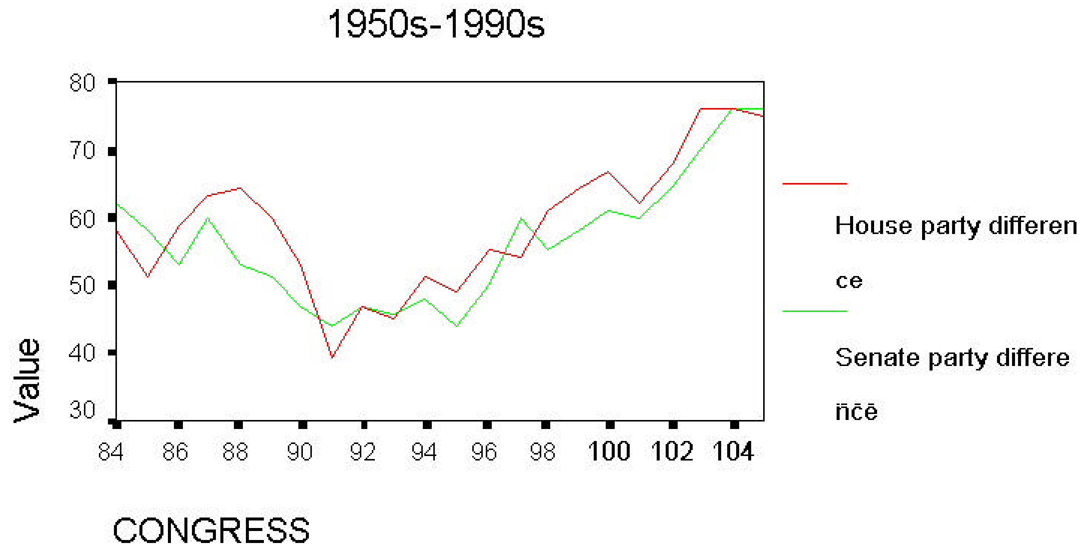
FIGURE 1

CONGRESSIONAL PARTY POLARIZATION

1950s-1990s



Party difference= mean Democratic party support-

(100-mean Republican party support)