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The Geographic Polarization of American Politics

By

David Allen Hopkins

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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University of California, Berkeley

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

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Professor Eric Schickler, Chair

This project addresses the question of whether American elections became more geographically polarized between 1972 and 2008. It finds that variation in partisan voting increased substantially over that time at both the state and regional levels. In particular, the Northeast and Pacific Coast became more strongly Democratic after the 1980s in both presidential and congressional elections, while the South and interior West remained solidly Republican.

I employ quantitative analysis of survey data to demonstrate that this trend can be largely explained by the increasing electoral salience of social and cultural issues, which divide Americans along regional lines to a greater extent than economic issues. The growing association of the national Republican Party with social conservatism has produced an electoral advantage in most of the South bolstered by an increasing edge over the opposition Democrats in aggregate party identification within “red” America. In more socially liberal regions of the United States, the Republican electoral position weakened substantially after the 1970s and 1980s, with Democratic identifiers becoming much less likely to defect to Republican presidential candidates in 1992 and thereafter.

I argue that these trends have significant consequences for American parties and the operation of Congress. Specifically, the growth of Democratic electoral strength outside the South has greatly reduced the number of moderate Republicans in both the Senate and House of Representatives, while centrists—elected mostly from the South and rural West—continue to constitute a sizable proportion of the congressional Democratic Party. This ideological asymmetry, though not often noted by previous studies of party polarization,

suggests that the congressional parties do not operate as mirror images but instead maintain distinct strategic positions, with Republican congressional leaders able to command a higher degree of ideological unity among their members than their Democratic counterparts. The challenge faced by the Obama administration in pursuing an ambitious legislative agenda in 2009-2010, including reform of the American health care system, was a visible consequence of this distinction between the congressional parties: the presence of a large moderate bloc on the Democratic side complicated efforts to enact liberal initiatives despite large nominal Democratic majorities in Congress, while the lack of a significant number of moderate Republican officeholders largely frustrated the new president's attempts to gain bipartisan support for his proposals.

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## Acknowledgments

For me, time has seemed to pass quickly since I began work on this project. Looking back, however, I realize that I started my research when Barack Obama was a backbench state legislator from Illinois, Sarah Palin was the immediate past mayor of Wasilla, Alaska (population 5,500), and George W. Bush's job approval rating as president stood above 50 percent. I would never have completed it if not for the help of many people, who deserve this very modest recognition of their role in bringing it to fruition.

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David A. Hopkins  
Berkeley, California  
May 1, 2010



## Chapter 1 Introduction

### **The Establishment Pol and the Football Star**

At 9:45 pm on the evening of November 4, 2008, Christopher Shays appeared before more than 400 assembled supporters at the Norwalk Inn and Conference Center in Norwalk, Connecticut, to acknowledge defeat in his bid for an eleventh full term in the United States House of Representatives. “I’m sorry this can’t be a celebration,” Shays told the crowd. “My two-year contract has not been renewed and no one likes being told someone else is taking your place” (Brown 2008). With his characteristically plain-spoken remarks, the veteran Republican congressman conceded the election to his Democratic challenger, a 42-year-old former investment banker named Jim Himes whose only previous experience in elective office consisted of a brief tenure on a local tax board.

Like much of New England and the suburban Northeast, Shays’s constituency consisted of ancestrally Republican territory dating from the party’s founding in the 1850s. Stretching across the state’s southwestern corner, including the affluent New York City suburbs of Greenwich, Darien, and Westport, Connecticut’s 4th Congressional District remained a bastion of establishment Republicanism even after the rise of Democratic electoral dominance in most northern cities during the New Deal era. Previous occupants of the seat included Schuyler Merritt (served 1917-1931 and 1933-1937), a Yale-educated bank president for whom the district’s Merritt Parkway thoroughfare was named; Clare Boothe Luce (1943-1947), writer, socialite, and the wife of *Time* and *Life* publisher Henry Luce; and Lowell P. Weicker Jr. (1969-1971), later a three-term U.S. senator and a leading moderate figure among national Republicans before leaving the party in 1990 to successfully seek the Connecticut governorship as an independent candidate.

Shays, like his popular predecessor, Stewart B. McKinney (served 1971-1987), initially held the seat with little serious challenge, averaging 71 percent of the vote in his first six reelection campaigns. But the party preferences of his constituents began to change in the 1990s. While George H. W. Bush, who grew up in Greenwich, narrowly carried the 4th Congressional District in 1992, no subsequent Republican presidential nominee won more than 47 percent of the two-party vote. For a time, Shays received enough support from ticket-splitting voters to maintain his hold on the district, albeit by narrowing margins; a well-funded Democratic challenger held him to just 52 percent of the vote in both 2004 and 2006 by associating the incumbent with the policies of the George W. Bush administration, increasingly unpopular in liberal-leaning Connecticut. Despite Shays’s long-standing reputation as a maverick Republican—and his claim in one campaign advertisement that he shared “the hopefulness of Obama” (Ebbert 2008)—the Democratic presidential ticket’s landslide margin of victory within the district in 2008 finally swept Shays from office after nearly 22 years in Congress.

These trends were not limited to a single congressional district. Upon his initial election in 1987, Shays became one of nine New England Republicans in the House and one of 42 representing the eleven northeastern states from Maine to Maryland, collectively constituting roughly one-quarter of the House Republican conference. Republicans also held nearly half (10 of 22) of the Senate seats from the Northeast. Reflecting the prevailing views of their constituents and the traditional character of their party in the region, most of these northeastern Republicans cultivated reputations as ideological moderates; notable examples include House members Hamilton Fish and Amory Houghton (New York), Silvio Conte (Massachusetts), Jim Jeffords (Vermont; later a senator), Connie Morella (Maryland), and Marge Roukema (New Jersey); and senators Weicker, William Cohen (Maine), John Chafee (Rhode Island), Warren Rudman (New Hampshire), and John Heinz and Arlen Specter (Pennsylvania).

By the time of his defeat two decades later, Shays was the only Republican member of the House of Representatives from any of the six New England states; the 2008 election left just 17 northeastern Republicans in the House and four in the Senate (compared to 75 and 18 Democrats, respectively). Similarly, a Democratic electoral advantage has solidified since the 1980s within several large states in the industrial Midwest (such as Illinois and Michigan) and along the Pacific Coast (such as California and Oregon) that a generation ago were likely to elect centrist Republicans. To veteran observers of American party politics, the depleted contingent of Republican moderates in national office after 2008 resembled an endangered species populating a small portion of its former native habitat.

While Shays was delivering his concession speech, his fellow member of the House Heath Shuler was declaring victory in his own bid for reelection on the other side of the Mason-Dixon line. Shuler had just won a second term representing the 11th District of North Carolina, centered on the Great Smoky Mountains in the southwestern tip of the state. The 36-year-old congressman is a stereotypical southern politician: a small-town native (from Bryson City, population 1,411, located in the mountains near the Tennessee border) and star quarterback who led his rural high school to three state football championships before finding wider acclaim at the University of Tennessee, where he placed second in voting for the Heisman Trophy in 1993. Returning home after a brief professional career, Shuler spent several years as a real estate investor before entering politics. He built his first campaign for Congress around the theme of “mountain values,” emphasizing his evangelical Christian faith (one television ad featured him standing in front of his boyhood church, while another depicted his young son kneeling in prayer as Shuler and his wife watched with smiles) and his conservative positions on social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage (Bendavid 2007, 104-106). Only one element of Shuler’s rapid ascent in politics stands out as distinctive: in an era of Republican electoral dominance in the South, he is a Democrat.

The 11th District of North Carolina has not recently been fertile electoral territory for most candidates of Shuler’s party. Mostly rural and 88 percent white, it bears little resemblance to most of the other North Carolina seats held by Democrats, which tend to be either majority-minority districts drawn to elect African-Americans or located in the Research Triangle of Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, a prototypical New South metropolis with a growing population of relatively liberal northern migrants. Even in the age of the

Democratic Solid South, the 11th District was occasionally competitive between the parties; it elected a Republican to Congress in the 1920s on the strength of the ancestrally Republican vote in the Appalachian Mountains that reflected pro-Union sentiment dating to the Civil War (Ehrenhalt 1981, 917). The district reverted to Democratic control until 1980, when it unseated a Democratic House incumbent (at a time when Democrats still held nearly two of every three House seats in the South) and simultaneously supported Republican nominee Ronald Reagan for president over Jimmy Carter despite Carter's roots in neighboring Georgia. Except for Bill Clinton in 1992, who won it by slightly more than 1,000 votes, no subsequent Democratic presidential candidate carried the 11th District. Barack Obama received just 47 percent of the two-party vote there in 2008, seven points behind his national showing, even as Shuler easily won a second term with 63 percent.

Over the past forty years, the United States has become more geographically polarized. Regions, states, and congressional districts have collectively grown more dissimilar in their partisan alignments in federal elections, and these alignments have become more stable over time. One component of this polarization—the transformation of the South over the past half-century from a one-party “solid” Democratic regime to a Republican stronghold—has received a great deal of recent scholarly attention (e.g. Black and Black 2002, Lublin 2004, Shafer and Johnston 2006). Less well-acknowledged, though increasingly evident, are countervailing trends outside the South, especially within the Northeast, coastal West, and large metropolitan areas elsewhere, which have come to favor Democratic candidates in both presidential and congressional elections. The gradual migration of conservative southern voters—and politicians—from the Democratic to the Republican parties over the past fifty years simultaneously bolstered the ranks of the GOP and pulled it toward the ideological right, making the party less dependent upon, and less likely to win support from, more liberal constituencies in the North and along the Pacific Coast.

In particular, the contemporary divide between Democratic and Republican regions of the United States is primarily a product of the increasing electoral salience of social and cultural issues from the early 1990s forward. Residents of Democratic and Republican territory differ more strongly on these issues than on the economic matters that have traditionally served as the basis of partisan conflict, and these differences can better account for the geographic divisions visible in aggregate electoral outcomes—even as economic ideology continues to exert a more powerful effect on individual vote choice. Moreover, survey analysis indicates that the increased electoral success of Democratic presidential nominees in the Northeast and coastal West in the 1990s and 2000s (as compared to the 1970s and 1980s) is a consequence of the greater party loyalty of Democratic voters, who became less likely to defect to Republican candidates after 1992. In congressional elections, Republican voters became more party loyal in the 1990s; these trends, when combined with the emerging Republican advantage in aggregate party identification in the South and interior West, have led to increased regional variation in congressional voting over the past two decades.

The rise of Democratic electoral success in the North, especially the Northeast, and along the Pacific Coast since the 1980s has been particularly concentrated within these regions' most populous metropolitan areas, reflecting the relative social liberalism of their

residents. While the growth of suburbs at the expense of central cities once seemed to herald the formation of a durable Republican electoral majority (Phillips 1969; Schneider 1992), many suburban areas are no longer bastions of Republican support, as they mostly were twenty or thirty years ago. The partisan transformation of Connecticut's 4th Congressional District over the past two decades from a Republican stronghold to a Democratic-leaning constituency in federal elections has been replicated in similar places elsewhere in the nation, including other suburbs within the New York metropolitan area (such as Long Island and Westchester County in the state of New York and much of New Jersey); the greater Boston area (including southern New Hampshire); the Main Line suburbs west of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Macomb and Oakland counties in Michigan; suburban Cook County and the "collar counties" surrounding Chicago, Illinois; and the suburbs of Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area in California.

Together, these developments have had significant effects on American politics. Unlike the 1970s and 1980s, each party now maintains a sizable, and increasingly reliable, geographic base of support in national elections, reducing the proportion of states and congressional districts that are highly competitive between the parties. The wide election-to-election swings and rampant ticket-splitting of the 1968-1988 period, which once seemed to herald "dealignment" and the declining importance of mass partisanship (Wattenberg 1984; Burnham 1989), have given way to an era marked by newfound stability in electoral results within states and regions over time and by the increasing congruence of presidential and congressional election outcomes within most constituencies.

Moreover, deepening regional divisions in the electorate have contributed to the increasing ideological differentiation of the congressional parties by reducing the proportion of both moderate-to-conservative Democrats, many of whom represent southern and rural western constituencies that are increasingly voting Republican, and moderate-to-liberal Republicans from the now Democrat-dominated metropolitan North. Yet the two parties have not polarized at equal rates. While the centrist wing of the congressional Republican Party had nearly vanished completely by 2010, typified by the unhappy electoral fate of Christopher Shays, a significant bloc of moderate Democrats—Heath Shuler and his colleagues—remained in Congress. This ideological asymmetry between the parties became particularly evident during the early months of the Obama administration in 2009-2010, as the White House and Democratic leaders struggled to win support for the president's liberal policy agenda among both a Republican Party almost entirely comprised of conservatives and a sizable group of moderate Democrats holding the balance of power in both chambers.

Why have congressional Republicans moved strongly to the right over the past several decades, while a significant bloc of Democrats remains close to the ideological center? Because Democratic voters are overconcentrated in a relatively small number of states and congressional districts, the Republican Party benefits from a consistent structural bias in both House and Senate elections; as the number of competitive districts has declined over time, this advantage has increased in importance. In order to compete effectively for majority control of either chamber, congressional Democrats must hold a significantly larger number of Republican-leaning seats than Republicans hold of seats than

normally favor Democrats. Due to southern realignment, the most promising Democratic-held targets for Republicans seeking to gain additional seats in Congress have, over the past forty years, tended to be right-leaning constituencies where a victorious Republican candidate would almost certainly be a conservative; as a result, congressional Republicans are less likely to perceive the existence of a tradeoff between their party's share of seats and its ideological purity than are Democrats. Because congressional Democrats must contest seats that lean toward the opposition in order to gain a national majority, they are more willing to tolerate deviation from the party line by candidates if such ideological independence "fits the district" and thereby increases the probability of victory. In addition, moderate Democrats have found much more success than their Republican counterparts at cultivating public reputations as independent-minded legislators who act as a powerful check on the liberal leadership of their party. For these reasons, moderate Democrats tend to outnumber moderate Republicans in Congress even when the Republican Party holds a narrow majority, as it did between 1994 and 2006; after Democrats gained control Congress in 2006, the moderate bloc within the party increased to several times that of the Republican opposition. In order to amass a national majority of any size, congressional Democrats must win a significant number of competitive and even Republican-leaning seats, resulting in the presence of a significant moderate bloc that can be expected to exercise regular independence from the liberal party leadership in order to preserve its chances for reelection.

For congressional Republicans, Christopher Shays and his fellow party moderates from the urban North and coastal West are increasingly unnecessary for the formation of a national governing majority; as a result, there is little reason to indulge their ideological heterodoxy. In recent years, moderate Republican members of Congress have been regularly passed over for choice posts such as committee chairmanships, have been subject to strong pressure and criticism from their own party leadership, and have faced a number of conservative primary opponents backed by national interest groups seeking ideological purity within the party, even when these challengers threaten Republican chances of holding the seat in the general election, while party leaders have shown little interest in recruiting additional moderate candidates to contest Democratic-leaning seats. For congressional Republicans, this approach has allowed for effective governance, with enactment of the Republican policy agenda possible even under circumstances of narrow margins of control. However, this strategy is not without significant risk. A strongly conservative governing style renders the party increasingly noncompetitive in constituencies that normally lean Democratic, such as much of the urban non-South, and increases the danger that the party veers too far away from the ideological center, inviting a backlash among more moderate voters.

For congressional Democrats, the pivotal role of party moderates elected from Republican-leaning seats reduces the risk of a chamber majority ruling in an excessively ideological manner. Instead, they pose a different and equally significant challenge. The lack of party unity resulting from the presence of a critical mass of officeholders who perceive an electoral benefit from distancing themselves from the party leadership and its (presumably liberal) legislative program threatens Democrats' ability to govern effectively when they hold a majority, or act as a coherent opposition otherwise. Even with a

nominally large margin of Democratic control in Congress, health care reform—Obama’s primary domestic policy objective—was not enacted for more than a year after his inauguration, with its fate in the House of Representatives unclear until hours before the final vote in March 2010. Heath Shuler was one of 34 House Democrats to vote against the bill, demonstrating the conflict between party loyalty and personal electoral incentives faced by Democrats elected from Republican-leaning districts. While Democratic moderates may be “majority makers,” in the words of the current Democratic speaker, the majority that they enable with their election tends to find ideological unity a perennially elusive goal.

### **Red States, Blue States, and the New Geography of Party Coalitions**

The recent resurgence of party strength both in the electorate and in government has inspired a growing number of studies exploring the nature of linkages between mass and elite politics. No understanding of this relationship is complete without recognition of the intermediating role played by geographically-based electoral rules in the United States. Though Congress and the presidency are ostensibly national institutions, the occupants of both are chosen via multiple simultaneous elections held within relatively small geographic constituencies—a characteristic that exerts a powerful influence on the behavior of candidates and incumbent officeholders alike (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978; Polsby and Wildavsky 2008; Doherty 2006). As mass party coalitions evolve over time, they influence the composition of elective institutions by reshaping the electoral map.

Claims that the growing ideological polarization of partisan elites, especially members of Congress, is associated with the emergence of a significant regional division among the mass electorate are neither novel nor especially controversial among contemporary popular analysts, pundits, and prognosticators. In the years since the close and contested presidential election of 2000 revealed a striking regional pattern of party support, with the Democratic Northeast, urban Midwest, and Pacific Coast bracketing an L-shaped Republican territory joining the South and interior West, members of the news media have converged on the view that contemporary American politics is dominated by an irreconcilable ongoing conflict between “red” (Republican) and “blue” (Democratic) states—terms coined by journalists in reference to the colors used to denote the parties on the maps displayed on election-night telecasts. The near-perfect replication of the 2000 state-level results in 2004—only three states switched partisan alignments between the two elections, and those that did merely improved the contiguity of the red and blue areas—seemed to confirm the accuracy of this proposition. Even the “revolutionary” Obama campaign, running in an unusually favorable environment for Democratic candidates in 2008, managed to win only seven of the 28 states that had twice supported George W. Bush. The broad contours of the partisan divide between North and South in the eastern half of the nation and between the coast and interior in the western half remained largely intact in 2008, further suggesting the durability of the red-blue divide (Hopkins 2009).

The years since the 2000 presidential election have produced a torrent of popular analysis, with varying degrees of empirical stringency, attempting to identify and explore

the salient factors distinguishing Red America from Blue America. Most commonly, proponents of the “red-versus-blue” perspective argue that the electoral gap between Democratic and Republican states can be explained by differences in regional “culture.” At their most precise, such claims cite social or moral issues commonly debated in the contemporary partisan arena, including abortion, gay rights, and the role of religion in public life. More imaginative accounts expand on these narrow political questions to larger discussions of the characteristics supposedly separating liberals from conservatives in contemporary society, including differences in lifestyle, recreational activities, musical taste, and even favored means of refreshment (e.g. Brooks 2001, Farhi 2004). These analyses frequently imply—and sometimes explicitly state—that cultural divisions have eclipsed the existing partisan conflict between social classes over economic interests and the welfare state, with some writers even positing a reversal of the traditional relationship between socioeconomic status and voting behavior (e.g. Frank 2004).

Over the past several years, political scientists have begun to address a number of assertions and conclusions drawn from these popular accounts, while a greater number of academic studies bear on one or more of the implications made or questions raised by the prospect of renewed regionalism in American party politics. Perhaps the most prominent critic of the “red-versus-blue” school of thought is Morris P. Fiorina (2005). In his influential volume *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina challenges several key claims and assumptions made by journalists and pundits, concluding that the popular account of a nation torn apart politically along geographic lines is little more than a fabrication of the news media.

Fiorina argues that red and blue states do not in fact differ significantly in their politics. Presenting survey data that reveal what are, in most cases, single- or low double-digit collective differences between residents of states that supported Al Gore and those carried by George W. Bush in the 2000 election on a number of items measuring party identification, ideology, and positions on specific issues, he characterizes these findings as demonstrating, at most, modest geographic variation on important political questions. Fiorina correctly points out that voters tend to think in ideological terms or take ideologically consistent positions far less than do political elites (since Converse 1964, a venerable and oft-confirmed finding in political science) and that talk of a “culture war” in the electorate at large is therefore an exaggeration. According to Fiorina, only politicians have become polarized over time, not the mass public, and he portrays the typical American voter as an ideological centrist facing an unsatisfying choice between two increasingly extreme parties.

While Fiorina’s critique contains many valuable points, he leaves some important questions unaddressed. For example, at what stage do differences in opinion among groups in the mass electorate reach the threshold of substantive significance? Fiorina frequently characterizes gaps on the order of ten percentage points separating the residents of red and blue states as relatively modest and unworthy of note. Although such differences might seem minor in comparison to the overheated rhetoric of some news media personalities, even relatively small absolute levels of variation can have a significant effect on electoral outcomes (and, by extension, the composition of elective institutions). For example, few electoral analysts would consider the political leanings of Minnesota residents, who gave

Barack Obama 54 percent of their votes in 2008, to be interchangeable with those of South Carolinians, 54 percent of whom supported John McCain. The winner-take-all system in place for both presidential and congressional elections in the U.S. greatly magnifies the consequences of what may seem at first to be relatively small differences in outcomes among geographically-defined electoral units such as states and congressional districts.

In another prominent response to the “red-versus-blue” perspective, Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006) argue that contemporary state-level differences in election outcomes are insignificant compared to those of the late 19th and early 20th century, writing that “[t]he question is not why are some states red and some states blue, but why has America become purple?” (p. 116). They support this claim with evidence that mean state-level margins of victory peaked during the “system of 1896.” Such measures, however, do not necessarily capture the true nature of electoral competition, in which very small marginal variation in outcomes can be highly consequential if the division of the vote between the parties is close to even, while much larger differences may be irrelevant if one party already holds a commanding advantage. The degree of partisan competition in a state in which the prevailing candidate receives 65 percent of the vote, for example, is not properly described as twice that of a neighboring state where the winner receives 80 percent, even though the margin of victory is one half as large. Though no state (outside the District of Columbia, treated as a state by the electoral college since 1964) currently provides candidates of either party the overwhelming popular margins routinely received by Democratic candidates in the ex-Confederacy during the era of the Solid South, most states today are still considered electorally safe for one party or the other in presidential and congressional elections, signaling that an appropriate standard of electoral marginality recognizes even comparatively minor differences in candidates’ vote shares as holding great practical significance. I return to this question in more detail in Chapter 3, demonstrating that geographic variation in national electoral outcomes has in fact increased substantially since the 1970s.

Fiorina also concedes that Democratic and Republican identifiers in the mass electorate increasingly differ over ideology and policy issues. He declines to refer to this development as mass “polarization,” identifying it instead as partisan “sorting.” The public is not becoming more ideologically extreme, he argues; rather, as party leaders have polarized and therefore provided more distinct ideological cues, individuals have become better at identifying their “correct” party affiliation based on their existing political preferences. While these claims are persuasive, it seems likely that even the partisan sorting phenomenon described by Fiorina would result in greater aggregate geographic differences in electoral outcomes and would therefore have important consequences for elective institutions. Much of the traditional ideological heterogeneity within the parties reflects regional divisions (such as the conservative southern wing of the Democratic Party and the liberal northeastern faction of the Republicans); as conservatives increasingly sort themselves into the Republican Party and liberals increasingly identify as Democrats, one would expect each party to become more dominant in the region where its associated ideology already prevails, even absent increasing collective extremity in the electorate.

Fiorina’s work joins a number of recent studies examining the effect of elite partisan polarization on the attitudes and behavior of the mass public. Bartels (2000) finds that



individual party identification has become an increasingly strong predictor of vote choice in both presidential and congressional elections since the 1970s, presumably as a consequence of the growing ideological differentiation of party leaders. Hetherington (2002) argues that the polarization of the congressional parties has led to a broader resurgence of party strength in the electorate. Several recent scholarly works (Layman and Carsey 2002; Brewer 2005; Stoker and Jennings 2008) demonstrate that party identifiers increasingly differ on social issues as well as economic interests, reflecting the partisan conflict on cultural matters that emerged among political elites in the 1970s. While these studies have tended to focus on individual-level analysis, their conclusions have potentially significant implications for aggregate electoral outcomes due to the uneven geographic distribution of party identification, ideology, and issue preferences among the mass electorate.

Moreover, findings based on a national sample of voters may obscure the extent to which the strength or direction of the relationship between various individual characteristics and vote choice could differ by state or region. In an important study rebutting the increasingly popular presumption that the wealthy are now more likely to support Democratic candidates than are lower-income voters, Gelman (2010) demonstrates that while the rich still vote more Republican than the poor, the strength of the relationship between income and vote choice varies significantly at the sub-national level: in Democratic-leaning states, wealthy voters tend to be socially liberal and so are cross-pressured between the parties, while rich voters in Republican states are mostly conservative on both social and economic matters, producing overwhelming loyalty to Republican candidates. Hopkins and Stoker (forthcoming) find that the growth in the influence of party identification on vote choice in presidential elections since 1972 has not occurred uniformly across states. Even if the increasing strength of mass parties is primarily a consequence of the ideological differentiation of party leaders, these findings suggest the presence of important state-level or regional differences in the mass response to elite polarization—differences that deserve further exploration.

Factors that hold great influence over vote choice at the individual level may not necessarily account for aggregate voting patterns. For example, Americans' views on economic issues remain more powerful predictors of their vote choice in presidential elections than their positions on social matters (Bartels 2006). Because public opinion on social issues varies much more by state and region than voters' positions on economic issues, however, the growing importance of social issues in accounting for the voting preferences of individuals can best explain the resurgence of regional differences in electoral outcomes.

Analysts must also contend with the likelihood that variation or change over time in the behavior of individual voters, when aggregated within the sub-national geographic units employed to elect the president, Congress, and lesser offices, can then in turn exert a powerful influence on the actions of public officials via elections, potentially creating a feedback loop where the original elite-level shift is increasingly reinforced by the reactions of the mass public. As Brewer (2005, 219) argues,

[i]t is also crucial to recognize that this process quite likely feeds off itself—elites polarize on issues, causing increased polarization among the mass on those same issues, which in turn fuels further elite polarization as politicians (who are after all elites) react to the views and demands of constituents and voters. This dynamic assists us in making sense of the highly polarized politics that currently exists in the United States.

For example, Rohde (1991) and Polsby (2004) demonstrate how changes within the mass electorate—in particular, the growing propensity of southerners to vote Republican—have led to a significant growth since the 1960s in the institutional power of party leaders in Congress at the expense of committee chairs and unofficial cross-partisan coalitions. Even if the roots of southern realignment can be traced to such elite-level developments as the partisan divergence over civil rights signaled by the Republicans' nomination of Barry Goldwater for president in 1964 (Carmines and Stimson 1989; but see Feinstein and Schickler 2008) and the “southern strategy” pursued by subsequent Republican party leaders and candidates (Polsby also credits migration from the North prompted by the spread of residential air conditioning after World War II), changes in the party preferences of voters can ultimately have significant effects in turn on the structure and workways of elite institutions.

In addition, individual political figures may find themselves caught up in larger electoral trends that, though initiated by changes in collective elite behavior, overwhelm their own attempts to influence outcomes. The defeat of Christopher Shays in 2008, described at the beginning of this chapter, illustrates this scenario. Though Shays had cultivated a personal reputation as an ideological moderate—with issue positions probably similar to the typical voter within his district—he suffered from an association with the brand and leadership of his party that made him vulnerable to challenge from a conventionally liberal Democratic rival. The relatively close margins separating the congressional parties since the early 1990s have made majority control of both chambers a potentially relevant consideration for voters; supporting even an independent-minded partisan increases the probability that his or her party's leaders will attain institutional power. Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, one of the nation's leading moderate Republicans, was defeated for reelection in 2006 despite a job approval rating of 63 percent (CNN 2006); apparently, most Rhode Islanders found Chafee's personal politics quite congenial but concluded that his victory would empower national Republican leaders with whom they had significant ideological differences.<sup>1</sup> By replacing centrist Republicans with liberal Democrats in these and similar cases, voters have simultaneously responded to and contributed to the ongoing polarization of party elites in Congress.

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<sup>1</sup> This interpretation of the election results is supported by the successful campaign strategy of Chafee's Democratic challenger Sheldon Whitehouse. Recognizing Chafee's personal popularity, Whitehouse argued that the election constituted a referendum not on the incumbent's own issue positions but on whether Bush-allied national Republican leaders should retain control of the U.S. Senate (Klein 2006).

Though analyses of congressional polarization sometimes imply that Democrats and Republicans are diverging at equal rates over time, measures of congressional voting indicate that the congressional Republican Party has moved farther toward the ideological right than Democrats have to the left (see Hacker and Pierson 2005). This asymmetry is, in large part, a consequence of the uneven geographic distribution of the two parties' supporters in the electorate; congressional Democrats are much more dependent than Republicans on holding seats in competitive or even hostile territory for their party in order to gain a national majority. Continued electoral success in these constituencies, however, requires Democratic officeholders to distance themselves ideologically from their own party leadership. As a result, strategically-minded congressional Democrats place more emphasis than Republicans on recruiting moderate candidates to compete in right-leaning states and districts; once elected, these members seek to maintain visible independence from the liberal wing of the party.

This partisan asymmetry has other important consequences. Even in the current widely-proclaimed age of polarization—and unusually strong party leadership in Congress—Democratic officials have struggled to maintain party discipline due to a sizable bloc of moderate incumbents. Despite decisive victories in the 2008 election that gave Democrats much larger numerical margins in both houses of Congress (and in the electoral college) than the Republicans achieved at any point during their twelve years of rule from 1994 to 2006, the Obama administration and its allies in the congressional leadership subsequently faced a significant challenge in winning support for key items of the party's legislative agenda due to the threat of defection from House Democratic centrists—most of whom are associated with a formal organization, the Blue Dog Coalition—and their like-minded colleagues in the Senate. At the same time, the near-extinction of the Republican Party's moderate wing due to the increasing Democratic dominance of the North and coastal West has complicated Obama's efforts to find bipartisan support for his proposals. Predictions that national Republican leaders would respond to the defeats of 2006 and 2008 by repositioning the party closer to the ideological center also failed to materialize in the months since the 2008 election, with most figures in the party preferring a strategy of broad and energetic opposition. This approach was validated by the continued existence of a significant number of normally Republican-leaning seats held by Democrats in both houses of Congress; these seats were both the most vulnerable to Republican challenge (and were appearing especially ripe for a takeover in the months before the 2010 midterm elections) and very likely to elect a conservative rather than a moderate Republican.

The growing frustration expressed by liberal legislators and observers alike that unified Democratic control of the legislative and executive branches did not guarantee easy enactment of the party's ambitious agenda is reminiscent of the party reform movement's calls for "responsible parties" a half-century ago (American Political Science Association 1950). Then, as now, intraparty ideological divisions followed geographic lines, with the Democrats in particular split between northern and southern factions that regularly prevented the enactment of the national party's legislative platform. While both congressional parties have become considerably more polarized in the ensuing years, reflecting the growth of geographic variation in party support out in the country at large, the continued existence of a significant moderate wing within the Democratic Party has

prevented it from moving as far to the left as Republicans have shifted to the right. The consequences of changing partisan alignments in the mass electorate have become increasingly visible in the behavior of the parties in government.

For students of American political parties, these developments offer several clear lessons. First, the relationship between mass and elite politics can be complex, with possible mass response to elite polarization itself contributing to further polarization via electoral outcomes within geographically-defined constituencies. Second, while the partisan realignment of the South is sometimes studied in isolation, it has had significant effects on the relative strength and success of the parties elsewhere in the nation, leading to a pro-Democratic response among socially liberal voters elsewhere that has prevented the formation of a durable national Republican majority. Finally, the two parties are not ideological mirror images of each other and do not face identical strategic challenges. An increasingly conservative Republican Party has found success at maintaining party unity in Congress but is progressively unable to compete effectively across much of the nation, while congressional Democrats have retained a wider geographic appeal but find the continued presence of a significant number of moderates among their ranks to be a reliable impediment to the pursuit of party leaders' most important programmatic goals.

### **Sequence of Chapters**

Chapter 2 presents analysis of individual survey data, finding that the increasing electoral salience of social and cultural issues among voters primarily accounts for the increase in geographic polarization between Democratic and Republican states, and that the "resurgence" of mass partisanship since the 1970s and 1980s noted by other scholars has occurred disproportionately within the Democratic Party in presidential elections and the Republican Party in congressional contests. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of regional and state-level electoral trends over time, demonstrating that the current geographic divisions evident in presidential and congressional elections are both substantively significant and unusually stable. Chapter 4 explores the effects of these trends on the parties in government, focusing on the emergence of partisan ideological asymmetry within the U.S. Congress. Chapter 5 considers the congressional parties' contrasting strategic dilemmas in contemporary politics through the lens of the Obama administration's health care reform initiative in 2009-2010, and offers closing thoughts on the state of political parties in contemporary American politics.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Roots of Geographic Polarization**

The widespread popular perceptions of a growing geographic divide in contemporary American politics surfaced abruptly on the night of November 7, 2000. As election returns were reported over the course of the evening in the close-fought presidential contest between Democratic nominee Al Gore and Republican opponent George W. Bush, a striking regional pattern of party support began to emerge on the electoral map. Gore won comfortably across most of the Northeast, running especially well in the large urban centers of metropolitan Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington-Baltimore; he also carried California easily on the strength of heavily favorable electoral performances in greater Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. Bush, in contrast, prevailed decisively across most of the South, Great Plains, and Rocky Mountains, even managing an upset victory in Gore's native state of Tennessee. Aside from the remarkably narrow (and ultimately crucial) margin separating the two candidates in Florida, the fiercest competition between Gore and Bush was concentrated in a few midwestern states, with slender Democratic victories in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota offset by similarly modest Republican triumphs in Ohio and Missouri.

A unique combination of developments ensured that the election dominated national news coverage long after the votes were cast: an unusually narrow national popular margin of about 0.5 percentage points separating the candidates, the (ultimately realized) capacity of the winner-take-all state-level allocation of electors to deny Gore the presidency despite his first-place finish in the popular vote, and the pivotal, disputed election results in Florida that were marred by flaws in ballot design and voting technology, requiring over five weeks of recounts and litigation before the U.S. Supreme Court resolved the outcome on December 12 by halting a statewide recount ordered by the Florida courts and effectively handing Bush the presidency. While waiting for the contest itself to be decided, journalists and pundits soon turned their attention to the electoral map, which appeared to depict an American public both closely and deeply divided along geographic lines. Commentators soon began to speak of a growing conflict between "blue states" and "red states," referring to the colors used to denote Democratic and Republican victories, respectively, on election night telecasts. Before long, these terms became part of the national lexicon; the near-identical state alignments that emerged in the 2004 presidential election between Bush and Democratic challenger John Kerry (47 of 50 states voted for the same party in both 2000 and 2004, the greatest state-level consistency in consecutive elections since 1904 and 1908) seemed only to confirm the accuracy of the "color war" vocabulary as an appropriate characterization of modern electoral politics.

Moreover, this red-versus-blue view of political conflict appeared to account increasingly for the outcomes of congressional elections as well as presidential contests. Over the 2000, 2002, and 2004 elections, Democrats made a net gain of five U.S. Senate

seats in “blue” states carried by both Gore and Kerry, while Republicans won five additional Senate seats in “red” states that voted twice for Bush. Most notably, Democratic Senate leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota lost his bid for a fourth term in 2004 after Republicans succeeded in portraying Daschle as out of touch with his constituents due to his high-profile opposition to Bush’s policies. By 2005, Democrats held 60 percent of House seats and 81 percent of Senate seats in the states that had voted Democratic in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, while Republicans held 66 percent of House seats and 76 percent of Senate seats in the states that had twice supported Bush’s candidacy. Even the relatively decisive Democratic victories of 2006 and 2008 left this regional alignment largely intact; 2008 Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama carried all 21 states won by either Gore in 2000 or Kerry in 2004, while Republican candidate John McCain, despite a strongly unfavorable national electoral environment for his party, successfully defended 22 of the 29 states won twice by Bush.

### **Rednecks versus Blue-Bloods?**

What salient factors separate voters in red states from their blue-state counterparts? According to a popular consensus, growing partisan divisions across the nation’s geographic regions reflect the increasing politicization of a clash of cultures within the American electorate. Drawing upon common perceptions—or stereotypes—of the key attributes distinguishing residents of the urban Northeast and coastal West from the denizens of the heartland, a number of commentators have argued that the differing partisan loyalties of Red and Blue America stem from the distinct interests, values, and lifestyles of voters within the two sets of states. One analyst summed up this view in the pages of the *Washington Post*:

A “red state” bespeaks not just a Republican majority but an entire geography (rectangular borders in the country’s midsection), an iconography (Bush in a cowboy hat), and a series of cultural clichés (churches and NASCAR). “Blue states” suggest something on, and of, the coastal extremes, urban and latte-drinking. Red states—to reduce the stereotypes to an even more vulgar level—are a little bit country, blues are a little more rock-and-roll (Farhi 2004).

David Brooks of the *Atlantic* and the *New York Times* has claimed a personal specialty in such exercises in comparative ethnography; his most celebrated contribution to the genre, a 2001 article entitled “One Nation, Slightly Divisible,” describes Blue America as a “great espresso machine” where “Thai restaurants are everywhere,” “NPR, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and socially conscious investing” are prized, and residents, including Brooks, consider themselves “sophisticated and cosmopolitan—just ask us about our alumni trips to China or Provence, or our interest in Buddhism.” But “things are different” in Red America, populated by men wearing “wraparound NASCAR sunglasses” and “wrecked jeans” who prefer hunting trips and tractor pulls to wine-tasting excursions and Woody Allen films. Such differences in consumption and avocation presumably produce divergent political behavior as well; referring to the then-recent 2000 presidential election,

Brooks wrote that the residents of staunchly “red” Franklin County, Pennsylvania, “felt comfortable voting for Bush, because if he came to town he wouldn't act superior to anybody else; he could settle into a barber's chair and fit right in. They couldn't stand Al Gore, because they thought he'd always be trying to awe everyone with his accomplishments” (Brooks 2001).

Analyses positing modern consumer preferences as reliable indicators of citizens' political persuasions abound in contemporary journalism, despite their dubious empirical validity (for a rejoinder to Brooks on this point, see Issenberg 2004). To some extent, these snobs-against-slobs accounts of American political conflict lie beyond easy verification techniques; as Larry Bartels noted dryly, the National Election Studies “d[o] not include questions about windsurfing or latte-drinking” (Bartels 2006, 217). Yet it is often possible to derive testable hypotheses from the impressionistic claims of popular political observers that offer at least plausible explanations of the factors driving the regional divide.

For example, while the presumed cultural conflict between the residents of red and blue states might be most colorfully portrayed in terms of allegedly divergent tastes in fashion, consumer goods, and recreational activities, “culture” in the political realm traditionally refers to voters' policy positions on “social,” “moral,” or “family values” issues such as abortion, gay rights, and the role of religion in public life. Perhaps the most prominent recent popular account of the relationship between the apparent growing political relevance of cultural issues and party politics in America is journalist Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (2004). Frank argues that the Democratic Party has lost its traditional electoral advantage among working-class voters due to the growing partisan salience of cultural matters, citing his native state of Kansas as a case study of modern blue-collar conservatism. Echoing a solidifying conventional wisdom among pundits, Frank perceives social issues as having essentially replaced economic interests as the primary basis of partisan conflict in the United States, resulting in the widespread defection of the (presumably) economically liberal but culturally conservative working class to the Republicans over the past generation—balanced only partially by the growing Democratic loyalties of a relatively small number of white-collar social liberals.

In a wide-ranging empirical critique of Frank's claims, Bartels (2006) demonstrates that white working-class voters (defined, in response to Frank, as voters lacking college degrees) became less likely to support Democratic presidential candidates between 1952 and 2004 only within the South. Bartels also finds that economic issues continued to outweigh social issues in explaining the presidential candidate choice of white working class voters in 2004—in fact, the comparative importance of economic preferences (as opposed to positions on cultural issues) in determining vote choice was *higher* among these voters than it was among their better-educated counterparts. He also reports little evidence that a substantial share of working-class voters perceive the Democratic Party as having shifted unacceptably to the right on economic matters, another common theme in Frank's writing.

If the empirical evidence is so unambiguous, what explains the prevalence of the misapprehension among Brooks, Frank, and many other commentators that contemporary politics is largely defined by a cultural conflict between “beer track” Republicans and “wine track” Democrats? Gelman (2010) argues that this mistaken belief is an example of the

ecological fallacy, which occurs when analysts draw conclusions about the behavior of individuals on the basis of aggregate data. He demonstrates that while states with higher average incomes are more likely to support Democratic candidates than poorer states, this pattern fails to hold among individual voters. Instead, propensity to vote Republican rises with personal income both among the national electorate and within virtually every state, with the relationship stronger, on the whole, in Republican-leaning states.

Although Gelman disputes the common explanation of the causal mechanism producing geographic divisions in partisan alignment, he agrees that “the differences between states are real, and indeed have changed in recent decades” (Gelman 2010, 37). In contrast, Morris P. Fiorina (2005) surveys the conventional wisdom and finds almost nothing worthy of salvage. Fiorina challenges a number of assumptions commonly made by news media personalities, focusing in particular on the claim that American citizens are moving steadily over time from the ideological center towards opposite poles, thereby becoming collectively more extreme in their political philosophies and inciting a “culture war” between the parties-in-the-electorate over social issues.

Fiorina’s response to widespread assertions of a mass migration from moderate to liberal or conservative ideological placements echoes the findings of most political scientists dating back to Converse (1964): relative to political elites, the issue positions of the American public tend to be centrist, ambivalent, unstable over time, and ideologically inconsistent across policy issues. Even on the subject of abortion, the quintessential “culture war” issue, Fiorina finds that many survey respondents fall somewhere in the philosophical middle, favoring legalized abortion in some but not all circumstances.<sup>1</sup> While he acknowledges that Democratic and Republican identifiers within the electorate increasingly differ over ideology and specific issues, abortion among them, Fiorina views this phenomenon as “sorting,” not polarization, arguing that it reflects the growing tendency of citizens to identify with the ideologically appropriate party (perhaps due to the progressively distinct cues provided by Democratic and Republican elites over the past several decades) rather than rising aggregate ideological divergence. Other scholars have distinguished these phenomena by contrasting *partisan* polarization—what Fiorina calls “sorting”—with *ideological* polarization; a number of studies demonstrate that the former has occurred over the past several decades (e.g. Levine, Carmines, and Huckfeldt 1997; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Levendusky 2009) while relatively little evidence exists of the latter.

Even while conceding the advent of partisan sorting in recent elections, however, Fiorina characterizes political divisions within the American electorate—whether among voters of different parties, ideologies, religions, or regions—as substantially smaller than

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<sup>1</sup> To be precise, this is also technically the position of most political elites; “pro-life” politicians commonly support legalized abortion in cases of rape, incest, and risk to maternal health, while “pro-choice” candidates, reflecting the Supreme Court’s holding in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and subsequent cases, tend to favor certain limited restrictions on abortion rights (e.g. beyond the first trimester of pregnancy). This does not challenge Fiorina’s claim that the mass public is, in the main, less differentiated on the issue than are political officeholders.



commonly portrayed. He presents a series of tables summarizing public opinion data on various policy issues; in most cases, the differences in mean responses between inhabitants of “red” and “blue” states are on the order of 10 points or less on a 100-point scale. Fiorina concludes that the view of a “culture war” between red and blue territory is little more than a myth advanced by news media personalities who exaggerate the degree and depth of conflict in society in order to attract popular attention.

Taken together, these prominent critiques of the red-versus-blue account of contemporary electoral politics, all grounded in analysis of quantitative data, appear to contradict many of its most grandiose assertions. Upon closer inspection, however, their findings amount to something less than a complete disproof of the proposition that the rising electoral importance of cultural issues since the 1980s has led to a significant growth in the geographic variation of outcomes in presidential and congressional elections. In fact, other relevant scholarly research, though not produced as a direct response to popular commentary, is thoroughly consistent with this claim, as elaborated further in the next section.

### **Culture War? No, But a Widening Skirmish**

In the years since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion nationwide, and the subsequent mass mobilization of religious conservatives, especially evangelical Christians, into electoral politics, public disagreements over social or cultural issues have received a growing share of attention from politicians, the news media, and academics alike.<sup>2</sup> While these issues frequently divided the leadership of both major parties when they first emerged into national prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, with significant numbers of socially liberal Republicans and socially conservative Democrats holding and seeking high office at the time, by the 1980s and 1990s the overwhelming majority of each party’s most prominent national figures held ideologically orthodox opinions—an elite-level sorting process hastened by the decisions of many individual public figures to switch their own positions in order to conform to the hardening party line.<sup>3</sup>

Given the well-established role of political leaders in shaping mass opinion (Zaller 1992), the advent of partisan divisions on social issues at the elite level might be expected to produce an echoing response within the electorate over time. As several studies have demonstrated, social issues began both to divide Democratic from Republican identifiers and to become a significant predictor of individual vote choice by the 1992 presidential election (Miller and Shanks 1996; Abramowitz 1995). Importantly, the emerging partisan

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term “social issue” to refer to abortion, gay rights, and similar matters; it is interchangeable with “cultural issue.” This usage differs from other sources, who may use the word “social” in an economic context (e.g. social welfare, social program, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> Examples of well-timed conversions in this vein include those made by the formerly pro-choice Republicans George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush and the formerly pro-life Democrats Al Gore and Richard Gephardt.

divide over these issues did not reduce or eliminate the electoral salience of the parties' traditional disagreements on economic policy, as assumed by Frank and like-minded commentators; in fact, both economic *and* social views have become more associated with individual party identification and vote choice since the 1970s—a phenomenon dubbed “conflict extension” by Layman and Carsey (2002; see also Bartels 2006, Stoker and Jennings 2008).

While skeptics such as Fiorina argue that the evidence hardly supports claims of an outright “culture war” among American voters (economic views remain a more powerful predictor of individual vote choice than social views, while the share of socially liberal Republicans and socially conservative Democrats in the electorate is still substantial), it is increasingly clear that social ideology represents a significant and growing second issue dimension within the mass public. Stoker and Jennings (2008) find that new entrants into the electorate in the period since party elites polarized on these issues demonstrate an increasing degree of consistency, or “constraint” (to use Converse’s term), between their party identification and social views, with the relationship becoming nearly as strong as that of party and economic positions within the cohort coming of age in the 1990s. When combined with the increasing association over the same period between party identification and vote choice in both presidential and congressional elections (Bartels 2000), it is clear that social issues are both increasingly reinforcing voters’ partisan loyalties and becoming more consequential to vote choice over time.

As Gelman (2010) suggests, many of the disputes over whether and why the American electorate has become more divided between red and blue territory rest on a lack of clarity over the distinction between individual and aggregate phenomena. While the inference of individual-level behavior from aggregate data risks misleading conclusions due to the ecological fallacy, the consequences for electoral outcomes of change among individuals depend on the interaction of these trends with the distribution of voters across districts and states in an electoral system with geographically-defined constituencies. Changes over time in the relationship between a particular individual attribute and vote choice will have a greater effect on electoral results if voters who share that attribute are heavily concentrated in particular geographic areas than if they are evenly distributed across the nation. For example, we might expect even a dramatic shift in the size or direction of the gender gap to have little effect on the extent to which electoral outcomes vary across geographic units, since the relative proportion of women and men is roughly uniform from place to place. A change in the political alignment of Latino voters, however, would be expected to produce immediately visible differences between the aggregate outcomes of the counties, districts, and states where Latinos are particularly clustered—south Texas, urban California, greater Miami, etc.—and the rest of the nation.

For these reasons, the finding that positions on economic issues continue to outweigh views on social matters in determining the presidential vote choice of individuals leaves several other questions unresolved. It is possible, for example, that voters’ economic views remain relatively constant across states and regions, while opinions on cultural matters vary substantially from place to place. Under this scenario, economic ideology could simultaneously explain much of the individual-level variation in vote choice but little of the state-level variation in electoral outcomes. At the same time, social issues,

increasingly powerful but still secondary factors in determining individual voting preferences, could at least partially account for contemporary state-level or regional variation in election results.

Table 2.1 employs survey data drawn from the 2000 and 2004 National Election Studies to explore the relationship between issue preferences and political geography. Respondents (major-party presidential voters only) are divided into three categories (“red,” “purple,” and “blue”) based on the partisan leaning of their home states in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections; each cell displays the mean self-reported position of each group of voters on a number of economic and social issues measured by the NES, scored from 0 (the most conservative position) to 1 (the most liberal). The assumption that the specific NES items included in Table 2.1 represent two coherent issue dimensions is confirmed by promax factor analysis that indicates the presence of two distinct factors corresponding to economic and social ideology (not shown; for similar results see Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder 2006; Bartels 2005). As Table 2.1 makes clear, while residents of blue states appear, on average, to be slightly more liberal than their red-state counterparts on most economic matters, differences between the two groups of states are consistently much larger on items measuring social views—especially positions on abortion and gay rights and reported frequency of church attendance (a measure of religiosity, an increasingly powerful predictor of Republican electoral support across religious denominations).

As Table 2.2 demonstrates, this pattern is consistent over time. Using the state classification based on the 2000 and 2004 elections, the table reveals that differences between residents of red and blue states over social issues consistently outweighed differences on economic matters in every election between 1984 and 2008, with remarkable stability in the average red-blue gap on both issue dimensions over the 1984-2004 period. (Extending the timespan backward before 1984 is complicated by the diminishing number of issue measures included consistently in NES surveys during previous election years.) While some commentators (e.g. Bishop 2008) have argued that the emergence of partisan conflict between red and blue states in the 2000 election and thereafter reflects a process of residential sorting in the United States, with individuals increasingly likely to seek politically congenial neighbors, Table 2.2 supplies little evidence for such a claim. While the electoral divide between red and blue states may well be increasing (a topic discussed further in Chapter 3), differences in the underlying issue preferences of voters in the two groups of states remained largely unchanged over this period.

The 2008 NES data indicate that the difference between the mean economic positions of red- and blue-state voters increased abruptly between 2004 and 2008. While these results may reflect some real change, they may also be, in part, an artifact of differences in sampling procedure adopted by the NES for its 2008 election study, including the oversampling of certain sub-populations in the electorate (for which the analyses here compensate via the use of sample weights). Regardless of the source of this exception to the long-term pattern, the average difference between residents of red and blue states on social issues continued to exceed the average difference on economic issues even in 2008.

**Table 2.1**  
**State-Level Differences on Economic and Social Issues, 2000-2004**

<b>Economic Issue</b>	<b>Red States</b>	<b>Purple</b>	<b>Blue States</b>	<b>Diff (Blue-Red)</b>
Services-spending tradeoff	.55	.53	.58	.03
Govt guarantee jobs	.42	.42	.42	.00
Size of govt index	.58	.56	.59	.01
Feel therm difference (labor-big business)	.48	.51	.51	.03
Govt role in health care	.52	.52	.53	.01
Govt aid to minorities	.38	.38	.41	.03
<i>Average</i>	<i>.49</i>	<i>.49</i>	<i>.51</i>	<i>.02</i>

<b>Social Issue</b>	<b>Red States</b>	<b>Purple</b>	<b>Blue States</b>	<b>Diff (Blue-Red)</b>
Legalized abortion	.57	.59	.72	.15
Gay rights index	.51	.58	.64	.13
Trad morality index	.38	.39	.43	.05
Women's role in society	.81	.84	.85	.04
Feel thrm: Xian fndmntlsts	.43	.47	.49	.06
Church attendance freq	.50	.55	.66	.16
<i>Average</i>	<i>.53</i>	<i>.57</i>	<i>.63</i>	<i>.10</i>

*Source:* National Election Studies, 2000 and 2004 (Major-party presidential voters only. Respondents interviewed by telephone are omitted due to the non-comparability of issue measures.)

*Note:* Figures represent mean respondent self-placement on scale of 0 (conservative) to 1 (liberal). Red/blue states averaged at least 4 percentage points more Republican/Democratic than the national vote in 2000 and 2004.

Red states: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wyoming

Purple states: Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin

Blue states: California, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington

**Table 2.2**  
**Red/Blue State-Level Issue Differences, 1984-2008**

<b>Economic Issue</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2000-2004</b>	<b>2008</b>
Services-spending tradeoff	.02	.00	.03	.04	.03	.06
Govt guarantee jobs	-.02	.02	.02	.00	.00	.10
Size of govt index	NA	NA	.03	NA	.01	.09
Feel therm difference (labor-big business)	.01	.02	.02	.00	.03	.05
Govt role in health care	.00	.06	.06	.01	.01	.10
Govt aid to blacks	.03	.05	.05	.02	.03	.12
<i>Average</i>	<i>.01</i>	<i>.03</i>	<i>.04</i>	<i>.01</i>	<i>.02</i>	<i>.09</i>
<b>Social Issue</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2000-2004</b>	<b>2008</b>
Legalized abortion	.13	.13	.14	.14	.15	.20
Gay rights index	NA	.15	.12	.09	.13	.12
Trad morality index	NA	.02	.05	.05	.05	.12
Women's role in society	.07	.06	.05	.08	.04	.05
Feel thrm: Xian fndmntlsts	NA	.09	.11	.10	.06	.12
Church attendance freq	.17	.13	.14	.14	.16	.13
<i>Average</i>	<i>.12</i>	<i>.10</i>	<i>.10</i>	<i>.10</i>	<i>.10</i>	<i>.12</i>

*Source:* National Election Studies, 2000 and 2004

*Note:* Figures represent differences in mean respondent self-placement on each issue between red- and blue-state major-party presidential voters (rightmost column of previous table) for each presidential election year (holding the classification of states constant based on 2000 and 2004 elections). 2000 and 2004 are combined due to the small number of in-person interviewees in the 2000 NES (telephone interviews use non-comparable measures and are therefore omitted).

The findings presented in Table 2.2 suggest that the familiar account of a contemporary political conflict between red and blue states based more on differing social views than on clashing economic interests has some basis in fact. Residents of states that voted safely Democratic for president in 2000 and 2004 have, since 1984, consistently reported decidedly more liberal positions on social or cultural matters than respondents located in states that served as the Republican geographic base in the Bush elections. While blue-state voters are also slightly more liberal on economic issues than their red-state counterparts, the magnitude of the mean difference is consistently smaller in every election since 1984; on no specific economic issue measure did the red-blue difference exceed .06 on a 0-to-1 scale between 1984 and 2004.

Previous research has found that social issues became more strongly associated with both the party identification and vote choice of individuals beginning with the 1992 election; however, this increasing electoral salience of cultural matters has supplemented rather than replaced the conflicts over economic policy that have traditionally divided the parties and their supporters in the electorate (Layman and Carsey 2002; Miller and Shanks 1996; Stoker and Jennings 2008). While it remains a strong—and increasingly powerful—predictor of individual vote choice, economic ideology has, based on the data presented in Table 2.2, a limited capacity to explain state-level partisan alignments visible in 2000 and 2004 because the residents of Democratic-leaning and Republican-leaning states differ only modestly on economic matters. The consistently greater red-blue differences on social issues suggest the possibility that their growing association with partisanship and vote choice over the past twenty years can account, in large part, for state-level differences in electoral outcomes.

Table 2.3 presents a series of logit regressions employing NES data for the years 1984-2008. For each presidential election (2000 and 2004 are combined in order to achieve an adequate sample size),<sup>4</sup> the table displays the results of four separate regression analyses. In all cases, the dependent variable is major-party presidential vote choice, scored 0 for Republican and 1 for Democrat.

The first column for each election (Regression 1) presents the results of a bivariate regression in which the single independent variable, State Category, is scored 1 if the respondent resides within a state that voted at least four percentage points more Democratic than the national popular vote, 0 if the respondent's home state voted at least four points more Republican than the nation, and 0.5 for all other states. Unlike in Table 2.2, where state classifications were based on the 2000 and 2004 elections and were held constant over time to demonstrate the consistency of differences in public opinion across the contemporary red-blue divide, the state category variable here reclassifies states based on the results of each election (with 2000 and 2004 averaged together). The series of analyses is meant to explore whether economic or social issues can account for states' status as Democratic-leaning, Republican-leaning, or swing states closely representative of the national popular vote. The national vote is subtracted in each election in order to

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<sup>4</sup> Roughly half of the 2000 NES sample was interviewed via telephone; the issue measures used for these interviews are not comparable with those administered in face-to-face interviews and are therefore omitted from all analyses.

**Table 2.3**  
**Logit Analysis of Two-Party Presidential Voters, 1984-2008**

<b>1984</b>				
<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.383** (.167)	.440** (.193)	.377** (.168)	.437** (.194)
Econ Issues Index		8.347*** (.533)		8.307*** (.533)
Social Issues Index			.870*** (.211)	.839*** (.247)
N=1376				
<b>1988</b>				
<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.368** (.166)	.152 (.188)	.242 (.170)	.062 (.190)
Econ Issues Index		7.061*** (.500)		6.948*** (.503)
Social Issues Index			1.734*** (.312)	1.397*** (.356)
N=1195				
<b>1992</b>				
<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.461*** (.145)	.286* (.170)	.188 (.157)	.110 (.178)
Econ Issues Index		7.897*** (.499)		7.260*** (.513)
Social Issues Index			4.120*** (.332)	3.334*** (.382)
N=1245				
<b>1996</b>				
<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.349** (.170)	.375* (.207)	.167 (.183)	.225 (.216)
Econ Issues Index		10.276*** (.690)		9.689*** (.710)
Social Issues Index			4.267*** (.385)	3.530*** (.465)
N=992				

**Table 2.3**  
**Logit Analysis of Two-Party Presidential Voters, 1984-2008**  
**(continued)**

**2000-2004**

<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.436*** (.133)	.544*** (.160)	.063 (.145)	.216 (.169)
Econ Issues Index		8.009*** (.457)		7.684*** (.472)
Social Issues Index			3.925*** (.321)	3.340*** (.383)
N=1408				

**2008**

<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	1.126*** (.128)	1.051*** (.158)	.780*** (.139)	.757*** (.166)
Econ Issues Index		7.149*** (.382)		6.965*** (.403)
Social Issues Index			4.275*** (.325)	3.807*** (.386)
N=1525				

*Source:* National Election Studies, 1984-2008

*Note:* The “state category” variable is scored 0 for states in which the difference between the state two-party presidential vote and the national popular vote exceeds 3 percentage points in the Republican direction, 1 for states in which this difference exceeds 3 points in the Democratic direction, and .5 for all other states.

Respondents interviewed solely by telephone were not included due to non-comparability of issue measures.

Standard errors in parentheses.

\*p≤.10 \*\*p≤.05 \*\*\*p≤.01



control for short-term political forces that may provide one party or the other with a national tide in its favor; occasionally, such forces are sufficiently strong to push even states that normally lean toward one party into the column of the opposition. Regressions 2 and 3 add indices as independent variables representing economic and social issues, respectively, to the logit analyses; these indices are constructed from the NES issue items displayed in Tables 2.1 and 2.2. The column labeled Regression 4 presents the results of the regression with both issue indices and the state category variable included for each presidential election.

In each year, as expected, the analyses measure a positive and statistically significant effect of state category on presidential vote: residents of Democratic-leaning states are, tautologically, more likely to support the Democratic presidential candidate than voters located in pro-Republican states. Adding the economic issues index to the regression (Regression 2) invariably produces a large and statistically significant estimated coefficient, reflecting the reliable power of economic views in accounting for individual vote choice in presidential elections. However, the presence of the economic issues index in the regression analyses usually has little effect on the size or significance of the estimated coefficient representing state partisan category. Only in 1988 and 1992 does the state category coefficient decline appreciably in value upon the introduction of the variable representing economic ideology, and only in 1988 does it lose statistical significance. These results suggest that while economic views remain strongly associated with vote choice at the individual level in every election in the analysis, they usually cannot account for differences in the prevailing partisan alignment of states in presidential elections.

When the index representing respondents' views on social issues is added to the original bivariate regression (Regression 3), the results are markedly different. The estimated coefficient of the social issues index, while perennially significant, is always smaller than that of the economic index, reflecting a comparatively weaker association of social views with the presidential vote at the individual level. However, introduction of the social issues index tends to have a much larger impact on the estimated coefficient associated with the state category variable. In every election from 1992 to 2004, the presence of the social issues index greatly reduces the size of the estimated state category coefficient and deprives it of statistical significance, indicating that differences on social issues account, in large part, for states' collective partisan alignments (Democratic, Republican, or swing) in recent presidential elections. Once again, the 2008 results represent an exception to the long-term trend; although the social issues index appears to have a greater effect on the value of the state category variable coefficient, neither it nor the two indices in combination (Regression 4) succeed in fully accounting for the difference in state-level outcomes—perhaps a consequence of the sampling methodology employed by the 2008 NES.

Table 2.4 repeats the analysis from Table 3 for the House of Representatives. As with the presidential elections analyzed above, states are assigned to three categories based on the difference between the statewide congressional vote and the national popular vote in each election year; midterm elections are combined with the preceding presidential-year elections. (The 2002 NES survey was telephone-only and is therefore

**Table 2.4**  
**Logit Analysis of Two-Party Congressional Voters, 1984-2008**

**1984-1986**

<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	1.192*** (.148)	1.369*** (.158)	1.193*** (.148)	1.369*** (.158)
Econ Issues Index		4.418*** (.309)		4.412*** (.309)
Social Issues Index			.188 (.164)	.048 (.175)
N=2166				

**1988-1990**

<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	1.209*** (.134)	1.321*** (.145)	1.244*** (.136)	1.350*** (.146)
Econ Issues Index		4.421*** (.317)		4.342*** (.319)
Social Issues Index			1.334*** (.216)	1.164*** (.232)
N=1855				

**1992-1994**

<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.730*** (.142)	.758*** (.155)	.749*** (.146)	.776*** (.156)
Econ Issues Index		5.344*** (.293)		5.005*** (.299)
Social Issues Index			2.067*** (.205)	1.157*** (.227)
N=2312				

**1996-1998**

<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.723*** (.133)	.675*** (.149)	.569*** (.139)	.565*** (.152)
Econ Issues Index		6.250*** (.388)		5.791*** (.394)
Social Issues Index			2.899*** (.268)	2.110*** (.301)
N=1587				

**Table 2.4**  
**Logit Analysis of Two-Party Congressional Voters, 1984-2008**  
**(continued)**

<b>2000-2004</b>				
<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.598*** (.128)	.572*** (.148)	.407*** (.137)	.411*** (.153)
Econ Issues Index		6.607*** (.431)		6.150*** (.444)
Social Issues Index			3.723*** (.332)	2.990*** (.379)
N=1235				
<b>2008</b>				
<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
State Category	.584*** (.143)	.492*** (.162)	.402*** (.133)	.376 (.148)
Econ Issues Index		6.058*** (.377)		5.666*** (.394)
Social Issues Index			4.301*** (.355)	3.494*** (.401)
N=1241				

*Source:* National Election Studies, 1984-2008

*Note:* The “state category” variable is scored 0 for states in which the difference between the state two-party House of Representatives vote and the national House popular vote exceeds 3 percentage points in the Republican direction, 1 for states in which this difference exceeds 3 points in the Democratic direction, and .5 for all other states.

Respondents interviewed solely by telephone were not included due to non-comparability of issue measures.

Standard errors in parentheses.

\*p≤.10 \*\*p≤.05 \*\*\*p≤.01

omitted from the analysis; the NES survey was not conducted in 2006.) Given the multiple factors aside from individual issue positions that are known to influence congressional election outcomes—such as the quality, or even presence, of a challenging candidate, open-seat status, campaign spending, and so forth (Jacobson 2008)—it would be surprising if issue voting fully accounted for state partisan categorization; indeed, the estimated coefficient for the state category variable remains significant even after the introduction of the economic and social issue indices in each pair of elections (Regression 4). At the same time, divergent views on social issues appear to explain more of the state-level partisan difference in congressional elections than do economic positions from 1996 onward, based on the relative changes in the size of the estimated coefficient representing the effect of state residence on congressional vote choice.

More than one analyst has noted that the increased Democratic success in presidential elections in the 1990s, as compared to the previous two decades, is due in large part to the party's solidification of electoral support in the nation's largest metropolitan areas, including greater New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Seattle—a trend that has helped to establish a reliable geographic base for the party in the Northeast and coastal West (Barone 2001; Hopkins 2009). We might expect that social issue differences might account for much of the contemporary gap in voter preferences between the presumably more culturally liberal inhabitants of the nation's largest population centers and the rest of the electorate. Table 2.5 presents the results of a series of logit regressions employing a pooled dataset of NES respondents for the years 1996-2004. In both presidential and congressional elections over this period, the relative Democratic lean of the residents of large metropolitan areas (constituting roughly 40 percent of the national electorate) can be explained by their comparatively liberal positions on social issues, while economic views fail to account for the aggregate difference despite their powerful effect on individual vote choice.

It is clear from these results that the relative power of economic and social issues to account for electoral outcomes reliably varies based on the level of analysis. Several of the scholarly responses to popular accounts of culture-war polarization in contemporary American politics have emphasized the continued primacy of economic views as determinants of individual vote choice in federal elections. Yet the consistently modest aggregate differences in public opinion on these issues at the state level limit their potential explanatory power in accounting for partisan variation among states and regions—and, therefore, the outcome of elections held in geographically-defined constituencies. In fact, there is little evidence that economic ideology has played a significant role in accounting for state-level variation—or for differences between populous metropolitan areas and the rest of the nation—in presidential or congressional voting in any election since 1988, while social issue differences account for at least a sizable fraction of the divergence in state-level electoral alignments from the 1990s forward.

**Table 2.5**  
**Social Issues Explain Distinctiveness of Large Metro Areas, 1996-2004**

**Presidential Voting (2-party)**

<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
Top 20 Metro Area	.182** (.085)	.296*** (.102)	-.092 (.092)	.042 (.107)
Econ Issues Index		8.153*** (.361)		7.671*** (.371)
Social Issues Index			4.014*** (.244)	3.306*** (.289)

N=2397

**Congressional Voting (2-party)**

<b>Ind. Variable</b>	<b>Regressn 1</b>	<b>Regressn 2</b>	<b>Regressn 3</b>	<b>Regressn 4</b>
Top 20 Metro Area	.242*** (.079)	.334*** (.090)	.008 (.084)	.146 (.094)
Econ Issues Index		6.491*** (.290)		5.984*** (.295)
Social Issues Index			3.329*** (.211)	2.492*** (.240)

N=2784

*Source:* National Election Studies, 1996-2004

*Note:* Top 20 metro area variable is scored 1 if respondent resides in one of the 20 most populous metropolitan areas in the nation; else 0.

Standard errors in parentheses.

\*p≤.10 \*\*p≤.05 \*\*\*p≤.01

### **Party and Geography in Federal Elections**

Until fairly recently, conventional wisdom held that the United States had entered a period of weakened party loyalties among the general public. By several accounts, the 1960s had heralded an era of “party decline” or “dealignment” characterized by decreasing voter turnout, reduced rates of mass identification with the major parties (as opposed to independent status), elevated support for third-party candidates, and an increasing tendency for party identifiers to defect from their party’s nominees for elective office,

especially the presidency (Wattenberg 1984; Burnham 1989). A number of recent studies have questioned this account, claiming that whatever decline occurred in the strength of parties-in-the-electorate during the 1960s and 1970s was effectively reversed by the 1990s (Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001). For example, Bartels (2000, 42, 4) finds a “revival of partisanship evident in presidential voting patterns since 1972 . . . [and] in congressional voting patterns since 1978,” arguing that “the American political system has slipped . . . into an era of increasingly vibrant partisanship in the electorate[.]”

Though these analyses tend to imply that the trend of rising party centrality among American voters has occurred more or less comparably among identifiers on both sides, perhaps as a response to elite-level polarization, in fact the parties have not been affected in equal measure. In presidential elections, this resurgence of party strength over the past 40 years has been driven almost entirely by the increasing party loyalty of Democratic voters. Table 2.6 displays the percentage of Democratic and Republican identifiers, including independent “leaners,” who report supporting their party’s nominee for the presidency and the House of Representatives in federal elections since 1972. While Republicans have remained consistently loyal to their party’s presidential nominees, with each candidate during this period receiving the votes of at least 85 percent of Republican voters, Democrats have increased their levels of support for Democratic nominees from a low of 59 percent in 1972 (when the party nominated the unpopular Senator George McGovern of South Dakota) to a consistent rate of 90 percent or higher from 1992 onward. In elections for the House of Representatives, however, the picture is somewhat reversed. Democratic identifiers were consistently more loyal than Republicans through 1994, with Republicans drawing even in more recent elections.

As with issue voting, individual-level change in the effect of party identification on vote choice has implications for state-level electoral trends that depend upon the nature of the distribution of aggregate party identification across states. While issue differences between residents of “red” and “blue” states remained relatively constant over time, as demonstrated in Table 2.2, partisan alignments changed considerably during the same period. Table 2.7 displays the mean party identification (using the standard seven-point party identification scale, scored from 0 for strong Republican to 1 for strong Democrat) among major-party voters within each of the three state categories based on the outcome of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. Notably, voters within what came to be “red” states were consistently more likely to identify as Democrats during the 1970s and 1980s than were blue- or purple-state residents. By the 1990s, however, this difference had faded, and by the 2000s Republicans began to outnumber Democrats within red states. In contrast, the electorates within blue and purple states maintained consistent pro-Democratic leanings throughout the period, with little evidence of significant trends over time in the distribution of party identification in either state category.

As might be expected, the change in red-state voters’ collective party identification over the past twenty years primarily reflects secular realignment within the South, a region which was once predominantly Democratic in its partisanship due more to historical accident than prevailing ideology. Over time, a southern electorate that is comparatively conservative—especially, as the analyses above indicate, on social issues—has increasingly brought its party identification into line with its policy positions, aided by the growth of the

**Table 2.6**  
**Party Loyalty in the Electorate, 1972-2008**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Presidential Voting</b>		<b>Congressional Voting</b>	
	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Rep</b>	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Rep</b>
1972-1974	59 %	92 %	85 %	76 %
1976-1978	81	87	80	73
1980-1982	74	93	79	76
1984-1986	79	95	81	71
1988-1990	85	90	86	71
1992-1994	91	88	82	76
1996-1998	94	85	77	86
2000-2004	90	92	84	82
2008	91	90	86	84

*Source:* National Election Studies, 1972-2008

*Note:* Figures represent the share of each party's identifiers who supported the party's candidate for the presidency or Congress (2-party voters only). Independent "leaners" are classified as partisans of the party towards which they feel the closest; omitting these voters from the analysis produces similar results.

**Table 2.7**  
**Mean Party Identification Among Voters, Three State Categories, 1972-2008**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Mean PID Blue States (as of 2000-2004)</b>	<b>Mean PID Purple States (as of 2000-2004)</b>	<b>Mean PID Red States (as of 2000-2004)</b>
1972-1974	.55	.51	.60
1976-1978	.55	.54	.58
1980-1982	.58	.56	.58
1984-1986	.53	.52	.58
1988-1990	.51	.54	.57
1992-1994	.54	.53	.50
1996-1998	.56	.55	.53
2000-2004	.54	.53	.49
2008	.59	.53	.47

*Source:* National Election Studies, 1972-2008.

*Note:* Figures represent mean voter positions on the seven-point party identification scale, scaled from 0 (strong Republican) to 1 (strong Democrat). For state classifications see Table 2.1.

organized Republican Party in the South after nearly a century of one-party Democratic rule dating from the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s (Black and Black 2002; Lublin 2004).

One way to reconcile Tables 2.6 and 2.7 would be to view the high rate of Democratic defections in presidential elections between 1972 and 1988 as nothing more than a reflection of the transitional party politics in the South over that period. It is certainly true that conservative white southerners' traditional loyalty to Democratic presidential candidates began to show signs of wavering in the 1950s, at least in the peripheral South,<sup>5</sup> and then more or less evaporated in 1964 and thereafter (with a partial, and temporary, return to the Democratic fold to support the Jimmy Carter candidacy in 1976), even as many of these voters continued for another generation to identify as Democrats and to support down-ballot Democratic candidates such as the party's congressional nominees. Yet the phenomenon of large-scale Democratic electoral disloyalty was hardly limited to the future "red states" of the South during the 1970s and 1980s. An average of 23 percent of Democratic identifiers (including independent leaners) residing in future blue states voted for Republican presidential candidates in the five elections between 1972 and 1988, as did an average of 24 percent of purple-state Democrats, compared to a mean defection rate of 27 percent among Democratic identifiers in red—mostly southern—states. Massive Democratic defection in presidential elections was a thoroughly national phenomenon in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in a series of sweeping Republican victories (including two 49-state landslides in 1972 and 1984) despite the overall preponderance of self-identified Democrats in the electorate both within and outside the South at the time.

In presidential elections, therefore, the primary effect of the increased rates of party loyalty among voters in the 1990s and 2000s on aggregate outcomes has been the establishment of a reliable Democratic electoral majority within socially liberal "blue America" (most of the Northeast plus Illinois, Washington, and California) where the party has had a consistent and long-standing identification advantage but where many Democratic voters were previously susceptible to defection (see also Hopkins and Stoker forthcoming). Within socially conservative "red states" (most of the South and interior West), by contrast, the increase in the effect of individual party identification on vote choice reflects aggregate change over time less in the latter than the former: a majority-Democratic electorate in which a sizable number of Democrats defect to vote for Republican presidential candidates, as occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, has been gradually replaced with a majority-Republican electorate in which the GOP's electoral advantage is no longer dependent upon Democratic defection but requires only that its rates of party loyalty equal or exceed those of the opposition.

In elections for the House of Representatives, as Table 2.6 reveals, Democratic voters tended to be more loyal than Republicans during the 1970s and 1980s. Beginning in

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<sup>5</sup> Though the South is commonly portrayed as remaining staunchly Democratic until the mid-1960s, Republican presidential candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower carried Florida, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia in 1952, and won all five states again in 1956 while adding Kentucky, Louisiana, and West Virginia.



the mid-1990s, however, Republican loyalty rates rose to match those of Democrats, a development which coincides with the Republican congressional victories of 1994 giving the party control of the House for the first time in forty years—victories that were particularly concentrated in the southern and western “red states” where the party was simultaneously benefiting from an emerging advantage in party identification.

Previous scholarship has established that both social issue positions and party identification have become more strongly associated with individual vote choice over the past two to three decades. Yet the implications of these trends for aggregate electoral outcomes are much less well recognized. Neither voters’ social views nor their party identification is distributed evenly across the nation; as a result, one might well expect a widening electoral gap between states or regions with strongly Democratic and socially liberal electorates and those with predominantly Republican, socially conservative voters. To a great extent, this prediction is consistent with the “red-versus-blue” view of contemporary politics advanced by many news media figures yet resisted by several prominent academic analysts.

Two other expectations for aggregate electoral outcomes flow logically from these individual-level trends. First, while the 1970s and 1980s were an era characterized by particularly high rates of ticket-splitting and, as a result, comparatively weak correlation between presidential and congressional election outcomes at the state and House district level, the increased party loyalty of Democrats in presidential elections and Republican in congressional contests from the mid-1990s onward have presumably made presidential outcomes within states and districts more consistent with outcomes in congressional races. Second, the rise of party and issue voting in federal elections—at the expense, presumably, of short-term forces and election-specific factors—could be expected to increase the stability of outcomes from one election to the next, with states and districts becoming more consistently dominated by the candidates of one party. Chapter 3 examines the implications of these individual trends for aggregate results in presidential and congressional elections.

## Chapter 3

### The Growth of Geographic Polarization

For most of American history, political conflict has occurred along geographic lines. The first party system established in 1800 included a Federalist Party whose base of political support rested within northeastern cities and towns, opposed by a Democratic-Republican Party popular among rural voters in the South and West. The emergence of slavery as the primary political issue of the mid-nineteenth century divided North from South so deeply that civil war broke out between the states—a war precipitated by a presidential election in which the Democratic Party split into two regional factions and the Republicans prevailed in the electoral college despite attracting virtually no popular support in the South. Later in the 1800s, agrarian revolts based in the West sought to curtail, mostly through a series of third-party and party reform movements, perceived economic exploitation by powerful eastern financial interests. In each of these cases, the importance of these issues in the political environment of their time is reflected in the electoral map, with strong regional variation in voter support of political parties explained by the presence of significant policy differences between residents of different geographic areas.

By the mid- to late twentieth century, however, geographic divisions seemed less important in defining the electoral coalitions of the parties. The severe regionalism of the 1920s, featuring a dominant Republican Party based in the North and West opposed by a largely southern Democratic minority, gave way during the 1930s to a durable national Democratic electoral majority under Franklin D. Roosevelt, who attracted northern city dwellers, union members, blue-collar workers, and blacks into a “New Deal coalition” along with the party’s existing base among white southerners. Soon thereafter, the formerly hegemonic Democratic regime of the “Solid South” began to crumble, introducing vigorous Republican competition to the region for the first time since the end of Reconstruction a century before. While regional political differences remained, they seemed to create disunity *within* the two major parties as often as conflict *between* them. Democrats, in particular, faced constant tension between a generally, though not entirely, northern liberal wing and a large moderate-to-conservative faction based in the South, while the Republican Party was somewhat less deeply divided between coastal moderates and heartland conservatives.

For each party, therefore, the cost of competing effectively across geographic regions was substantial internal ideological heterogeneity. The mid-twentieth century saw committee government rule Congress at the expense of party leaders, several prominent national convention fights over presidential nominees and platforms, and decreased party loyalty—so-called “dealignment”—among voters (Wattenberg 1998; Burnham 1989). Partisan geographic differences declined and became less consistent over time: 44 of 48 states voted for different parties in the 1956 and 1964 presidential elections, while 43 of

50 switched parties between 1964 and 1972. A rise in the rate of split-ticket voting after 1968 created a decline in the correspondence of presidential and congressional election outcomes within individual states and districts, often leading to divided government at the federal level.

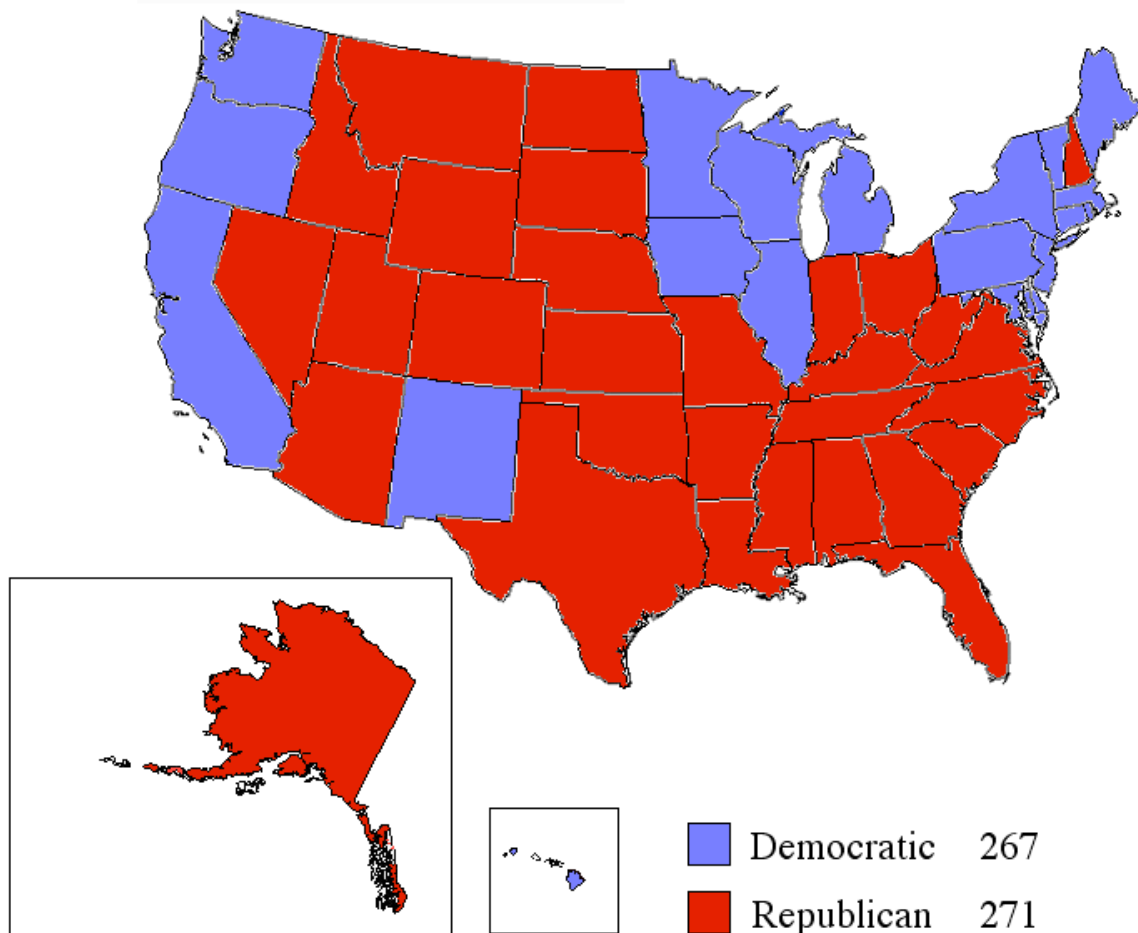
Just as the era of dealignment corresponded with a period of reduced regionalism (at least in terms of conflict between, rather than within, the two major parties), the rejuvenated and polarized party politics of today might be expected to coincide with renewed geographic differences in electoral outcomes. As Chapter 2 revealed, the rising electoral importance of social issues as determinants of individual vote choice accounts in large part for states' differing partisan alignments in recent elections. At the same time, voters who identify with a political party have become more likely since the 1970s to support that party's candidate for federal office—especially Democrats in presidential elections and Republicans in congressional contests. Variation in electoral outcomes among Democratic-leaning, Republican-leaning, and competitive states have corresponded more closely from the 1990s forward to differences in the aggregate distribution of party identification within each group of states (see also Hopkins and Stoker forthcoming).

The resurgent influence of party identification in accounting for the candidate choices of individual voters in federal elections since the 1970s and 1980s has, over the past decade, become an increasingly familiar and well-accepted finding among electoral scholars (e.g. Bartels 2000, Hetherington 2001), as has the rising importance over the same period of social and cultural issues as determinants of both party identification and voting preferences. Yet the potentially significant consequences of such trends for aggregate electoral outcomes—and, in particular, for the political geography of the United States—are less well-acknowledged, at least among political scientists. In general, journalists and commentators have been more convinced than academic scholars by claims that the U.S. has become increasingly polarized along geographic lines.

This view emerged suddenly in the wake of the 2000 presidential election as a widespread reaction to the pattern of party support visible in the state-by-state returns (see Figure 3.1). This now-familiar “red versus blue” electoral map appeared to reveal a renewal of partisan regional divisions in American politics. While the period between Reconstruction and the New Deal was characterized by partisan conflict between a predominantly Republican North and staunchly Democratic South, with a mostly Republican-leaning but more politically volatile West, the contemporary electoral alignments appeared to consist of a strongly Republican South, a North divided between a Democratic-leaning Northeast and more politically competitive Midwest, and a West similarly split between a Democratic coast and Republican interior.

The years between 2000 and 2004 were particularly politically eventful, featuring a major terrorist attack on the United States, American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, an economic recession, and an unusually protracted and bitter presidential campaign. Yet the final state-level results of the election replicated the 2000 outcome almost perfectly (see Figure 3.2). Only three states voted for different parties in the two elections (the highest level of consistency between consecutive elections since 1904 and 1908), and the partisan reversals of New Hampshire and New Mexico actually improved the contiguity of the “red”

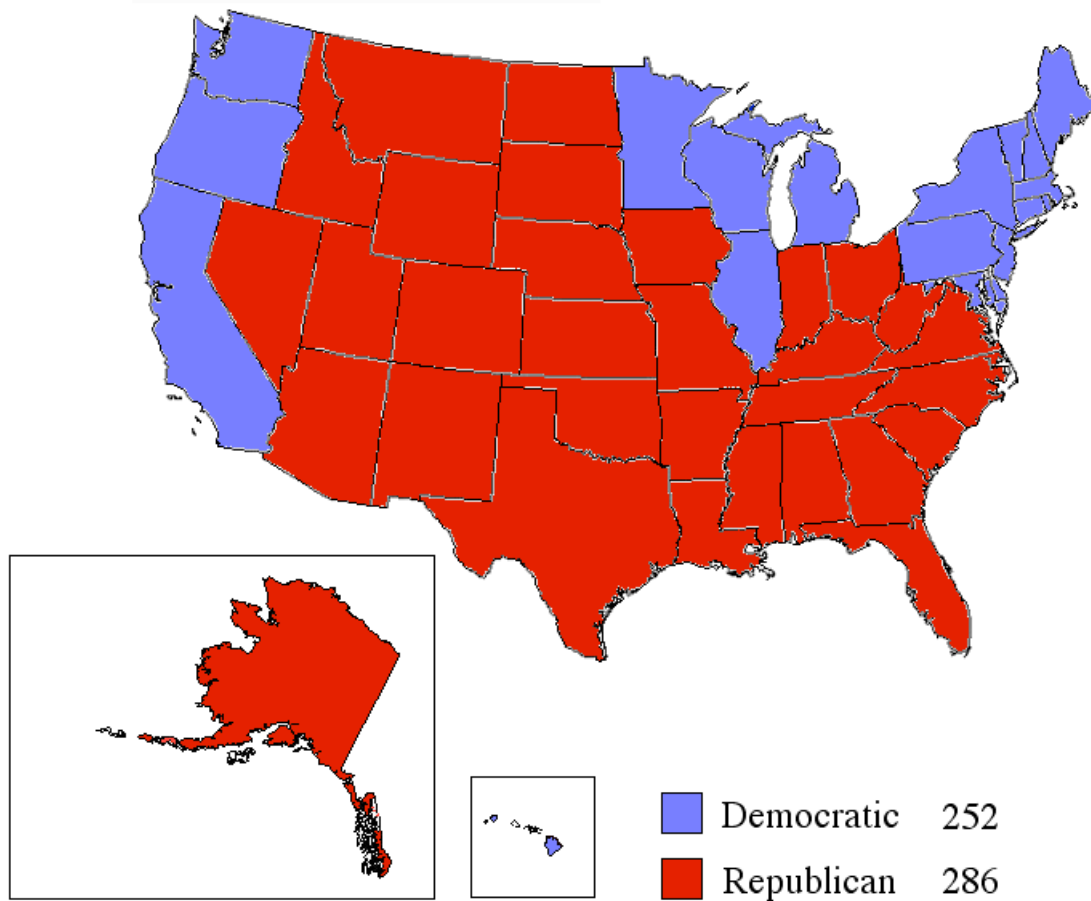
**Figure 3.1**  
**The 2000 Presidential Election**



and “blue” territory, rendering the Northeast solidly Democratic and the interior West unanimously Republican.

Even the 2008 election, a contest between Democrat Barack Obama, a first-term U.S. senator running on a theme of bringing change to Washington, and Republican John McCain, a self-styled maverick Republican, failed to reorder the political map. Obama made some inroads into previously “red” territory, carrying three states in the South and three in the interior West, in most cases by narrow margins, as well as two midwestern states that had previously voted twice for Bush. Yet these results are fully consistent with a national vote swing in favor of the Democratic Party between 2004 and 2008 due to poor national economic performance and the resulting widespread unpopularity of the Bush

**Figure 3.2**  
**The 2004 Presidential Election**



administration. Obama also benefited from a significant fundraising advantage over McCain, which allowed his campaign the luxury of contesting—and significantly outspending the opposition in—normally Republican-leaning states such as Indiana and North Carolina that were not central to his electoral college strategy.<sup>1</sup> As Figure 2.3 demonstrates, most of the traditionally Republican South, Great Plains, and Rocky

<sup>1</sup> The Wisconsin Advertising Project reported that Obama outspent McCain on television spots during the final week of October 2008 by a 2-to-1 ratio in North Carolina and a 4-to-1 ratio in Indiana (Wisconsin Advertising Project 2008).

Mountain states remained loyal to the McCain-Palin ticket in 2008 despite a severely unfavorable national political environment for the party.

The electoral map therefore exhibited far more continuity than change across the three presidential elections from 2000 to 2008. Forty states and the District of Columbia supported the same party's presidential nominee in all three contests. These states collectively cast 422 electoral votes (under the post-2000 census allocation of electors), or 78 percent of the national total. Such consistency has tended to lend greater popular credence to the "red-versus-blue" account of contemporary politics.

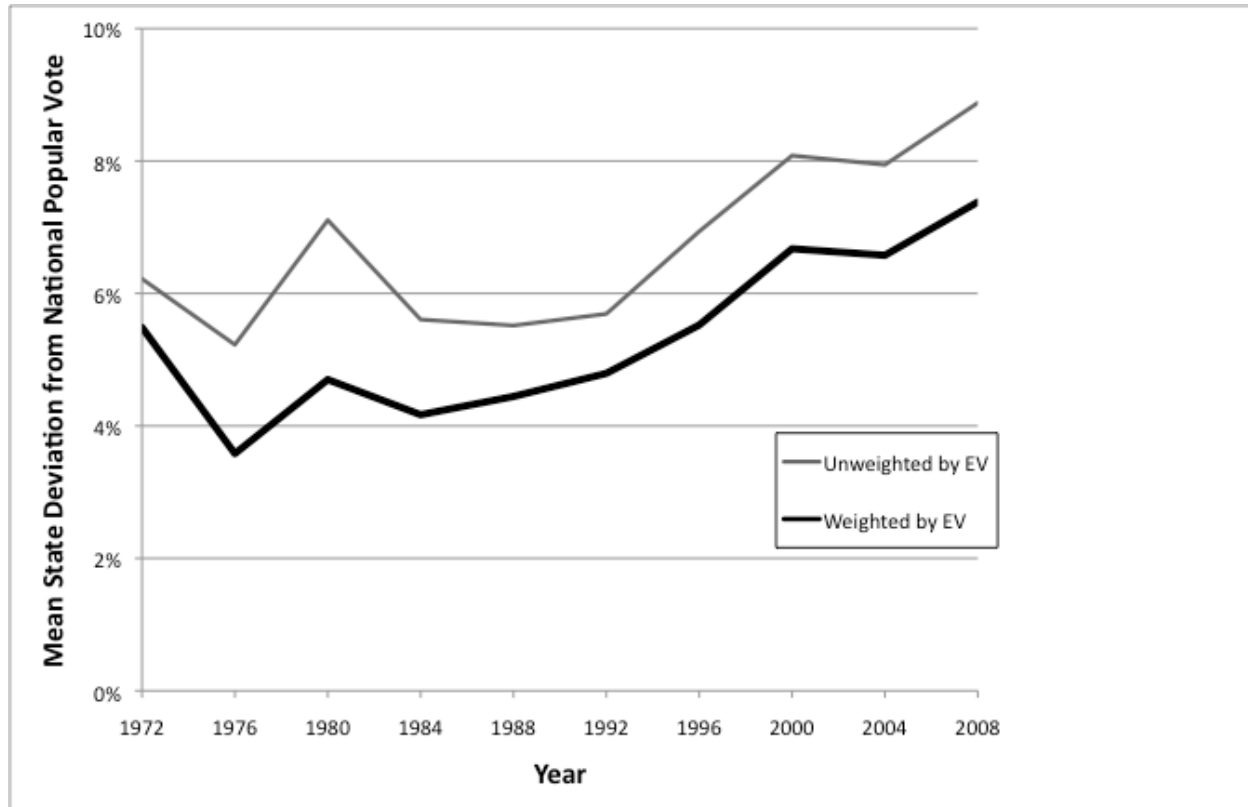
### **Geographic Polarization and State Competition in Presidential Elections**

Skeptics of the claim that the nation has become deeply divided into warring partisan geographic bastions point out that the categorization of states as either "red" or "blue" ignores the degree of competition within states, refusing to distinguish electorally safe party strongholds from fiercely-contested battlegrounds in which one side prevailed by a narrow margin. Of course, the electoral college also fails to acknowledge this distinction, due to the winner-take-all unit rule employed by all but two states for the allocation of electors to candidates. (The two exceptions, Maine and Nebraska, award two electors to the candidate placing first in the statewide popular vote and one elector to the winner of each congressional district within the state.) In 2000, the disputed count of ballots in the state of Florida ultimately decided the outcome of the presidential election because Florida's 25 electors held the balance of power in the electoral college; in the final official count, the state earned "red" status by a margin of 537 popular votes out of 6 million cast.

Few political analysts would deny that some states, such as Florida in 2000, are closely divided between the parties and are therefore in a sense more accurately characterized as "purple" than either red or blue. According to some critics of the mass polarization account of contemporary politics, this is a potentially fatal oversight, resulting in a gross oversimplification as state-level election results are "compressed into a dichotomous variable . . . with enormous loss of information" while obscuring the fact that "many states are marginal and not securely in the camp of one party or the other. In language analogous to that used to describe individual voters, we might call such states 'ambivalent' or 'uncertain'" (Fiorina 2005, 9; see also Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder 2006). Advocates of the red-versus-blue hypothesis might respond that these "ambivalent" states constitute a shrinking minority of the nation, as most states have become more strongly and consistently aligned with one of the major parties in presidential elections.

One approach to addressing this dispute requires examining the degree of state-level differences in electoral outcomes over time. Increasing levels of state-by-state variation in the presidential vote would indicate that states are polarizing into opposing partisan categories, while the opposite trend would signal growing national homogeneity. Figure 3.4 displays the mean difference in percentage points between the state-level and national two-party popular vote for each presidential election between 1972 and 2008. During the 1970s and 1980s, the average state consistently differed from the national two-party vote division by about six percentage points; in an election in which the parties

**Figure 3.4**  
**State-Level Variation in Presidential Election Outcomes, 1972-2008**



*Source:* Compiled by author.

received equal shares of the national vote, the typical state therefore supported one candidate by a margin of 56 percent to 44 percent.

The average difference between each state's two-party vote division and the national popular vote remained relatively constant from 1972 to 1992 but then increased to eight percentage points by 2000 and nearly nine by 2004. Weighting states by the number of electoral votes that they cast reduces the size of the mean state deviation across the time period covered in Figure 3.4, reflecting the tendency of populous states to be more closely divided between the parties (or at least more representative of the national vote). Yet the overall pattern remains unchanged; the extent of state-level variation nearly doubled between 1976 and 2008.

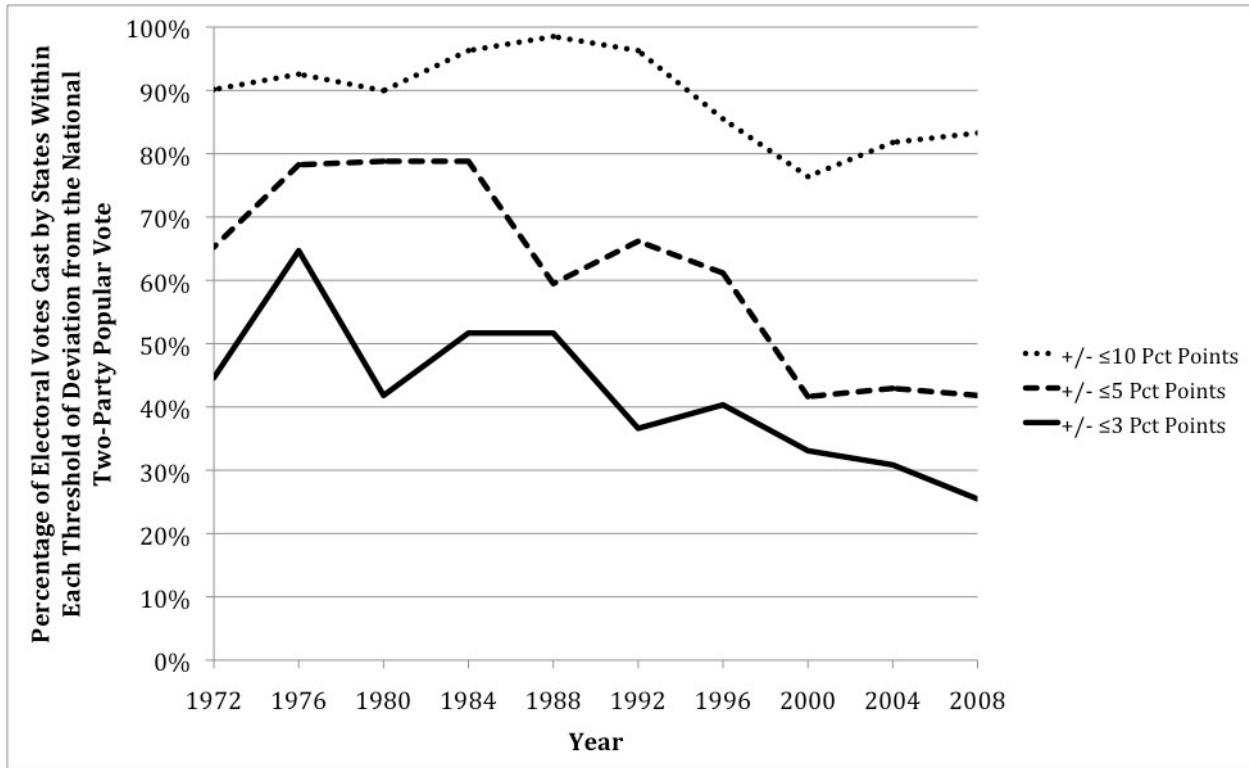
These findings, while appearing to indicate that state-level polarization in presidential elections has increased markedly during the past four decades, are of limited use in addressing the question of whether the geographic scope of partisan competition has diminished over the same period. The concept of “competitiveness” within a state or other geographic unit is, in common usage, a function of the degree of uncertainty of the electoral outcome within the state, ranging from evenly divided states or “tossups” (where either candidate has roughly equal odds of winning, as in a coin flip) to “safe” or “base” states presumed to be sure bets for one side or the other. Margins of victory within states reflect those states’ political competitiveness, of course, but the two are not properly synonymous because the effect of differences or changes in electoral margins on the uncertainty of electoral outcomes is highly dependent on the distance of those margins from zero (i.e. an equal division of the vote). In 2008, for example, Barack Obama’s popular margin of victory was 86 percentage points in the District of Columbia, while in his home state of Illinois it was “only” 20 points. Yet few political analysts would consider Illinois in 2008 to have been more competitive than the District of Columbia by a factor of four; rather, once a certain threshold advantage is reached, the geographic unit in question is considered “safe” and its outcome virtually certain regardless of the ultimate margin of victory. By contrast, the relatively tiny difference in electoral margins between North Carolina (Obama 50.2 percent, McCain 49.8 percent) and Missouri (McCain 50.1 percent, Obama 49.9 percent) were comparatively consequential because they proved decisive to the outcome in the two states.

The data presented in Figure 3.4 are therefore consistent with two distinct potential developments. In one scenario, the share of states that are closely divided between the parties has remained relatively constant over time, while electoral margins in non-competitive states have increased substantially. In other words, the proportion of purple states has not declined, but the red states are becoming redder and the blue states bluer, thus increasing the overall state-level variation in electoral outcomes. Alternatively, growth over time in the mean state deviation from the national popular vote division could reflect expansion of the non-competitive red and blue categories at the expense of the size of the competitive purple category, however defined. The second scenario seems more consistent with the contemporary popular conventional wisdom challenged by Fiorina and his colleagues, and would have more significant implications for the conduct of presidential campaigns and the predictability of electoral outcomes.

Figure 3.5 displays the proportion of electoral votes cast in states that fall within ten, five, and three percentage points of the national two-party vote division in each election from 1972 to 2008. In effect, these numerical thresholds serve as three progressively strict definitions of competitiveness—or, more precisely, representativeness of the national electorate, since the national two-party vote is subtracted in order to account for short-term electoral forces in specific elections that are assumed to exert equal effects across states. The states that fell within these boundaries are therefore those with outcomes that most closely mirrored the national popular vote and thus held the pivotal position in the electoral college. In a closely-divided election, such as 1976 or 2000, these states also featured the narrowest absolute margins of victory; in a national landslide, such as 1972 or 1984, powerful short-term factors—economic performance, foreign policy



**Figure 3.5**  
**The Declining Scope of Competition in Presidential Elections, 1972-2008**



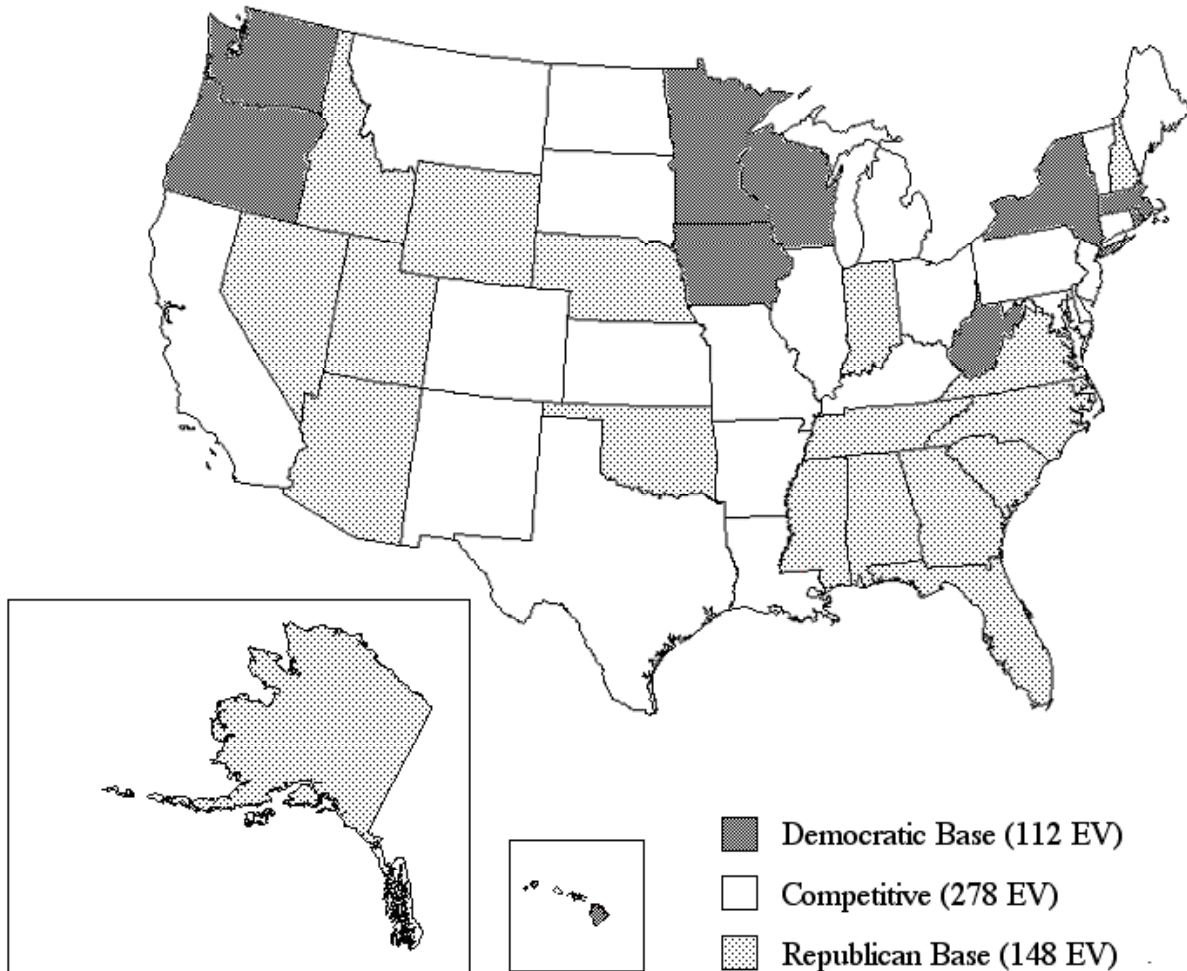
Source: Compiled by author.

success or failure, particularly attractive or unattractive candidates—may be sufficient to pull even states that are relatively hospitable to the losing party into the electoral coalition of the winning side.

As Figure 3.5 reveals, the scope of competition—or share of purple states—has declined over the past four decades regardless of the specific cut point used to separate these representative or “swing” states from safe partisan bastions. During the 1970s and 1980s, nearly 80 percent of all electoral votes were commonly cast by states falling within five percentage points of the national popular vote, and roughly half were cast by states that differed from the national vote by three points or less. By 2008, these figures had declined to 42 percent and 25 percent, respectively.

Figure 3.6 displays the alignment of states in the 1988 presidential election, classifying states as competitive if the two-party popular vote in the state fell within three percentage points in either direction of the national vote division. Because Republican

**Figure 3.6**  
**State Alignments in the 1988 Presidential Election**



nominee George H. W. Bush received 54 percent of the national two-party popular vote, this category consists of state in which Bush's share of the vote ranged from 51 to 57 percent. States in which Bush outperformed his national showing by more than three points are classified as Base Republican states; those in which Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis exceeded his national performance by more than three points are considered Base Democratic states.

The 1988 electoral map is notable for its wide scope of partisan competition. More than 50 percent of the total number of electoral votes were cast by states in the competitive category, including future Democratic strongholds Vermont, Maryland, New Jersey, and

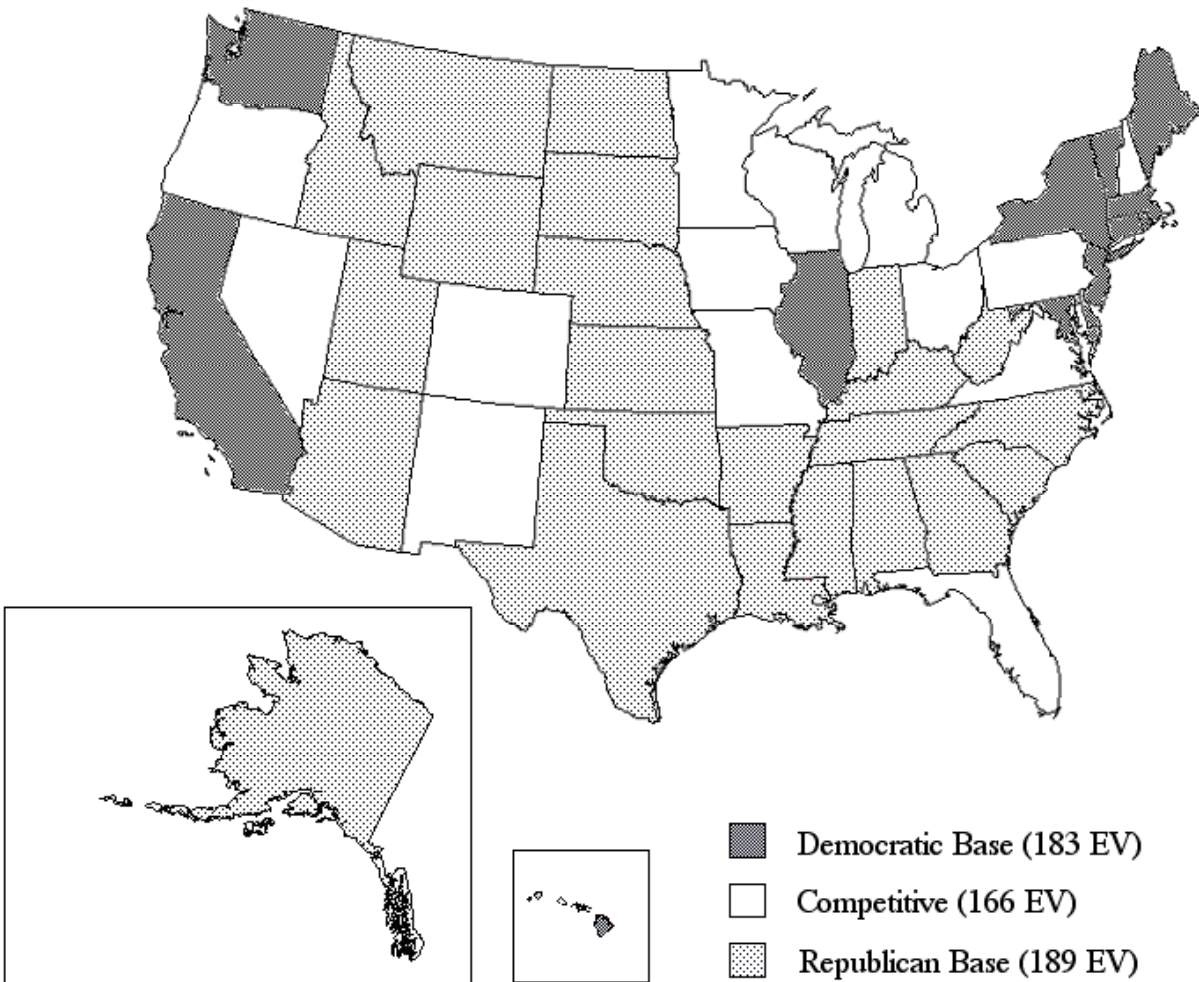
Illinois, as well as future Republican bastions North and South Dakota, Kentucky, and Louisiana. California and Texas, subsequently anchors of the base Democratic and Republican geographic coalitions, respectively, were both considered swing states in the 1988 election (Bush ultimately carried California by three percentage points, while Dukakis selected Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen as his running mate in part to make a bid for the state's electoral votes). In general, though Figure 3.6 reveals some clusters of adjacent states of like categorization, especially a group of Republican base states in the Southeast, the 1988 election lacked a strong regional pattern of party alignments. In addition, seven of the nine most populous states in the nation fell within the competitive (or "swing") category, reinforcing the common perception at the time that the electoral college encouraged presidential campaigns to concentrate their attention and resources on the nation's largest states (e.g. Brams and Davis 1974).

By the 2004 presidential election, the size of the competitive category had declined appreciably, as a larger proportion of states voted significantly more Republican or Democratic than the national electorate. As Figure 3.7 shows, the Democratic base by 2004 had expanded to include the entire Northeast except for Pennsylvania and New Hampshire, plus Illinois and three of the four Pacific Coast states, most notably California (itself casting 55 electoral votes, or 20 percent of the total needed to win the presidency). At the same time, the Republican base now stretched in a contiguous band from the South Atlantic through Appalachia, west to Texas, and northwest through the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. Each party's geographic base cast more electoral votes in 2004 than the states in the politically competitive category. In comparison with the familiar red-blue map (see Figure 3.2), Figure 3.7 reveals the particular concentration of marginal states in the Midwest, as opposed to the relative partisan security of the other geographic regions.

While the same pattern of declining state-level competition between 1988 and 2004 is equally apparent under more lenient definitions of state competitiveness, as indicated by Figure 3.5, the three-percentage-point margin employed in Figures 3.6 and 3.7 appears to best capture the population of states where the presidential campaigns consider the outcome to be in doubt (assuming a relatively competitive national election). Because the electoral college and the unit rule allocation of electors encourage candidates to focus their voter persuasion efforts on marginal states, they become contested electoral battlegrounds in the final months of the presidential campaign, with both sides concentrating their television advertising, candidate visits, and voter mobilization drives in these states while largely ignoring the rest of the nation. In 2004, 88 percent of the state visits by the four presidential and vice-presidential nominees over the final two months of the campaign occurred within states classified as competitive in Figure 3.7; more than half of all visits were concentrated within the six midwestern battlegrounds of Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin (Goux and Hopkins 2008).

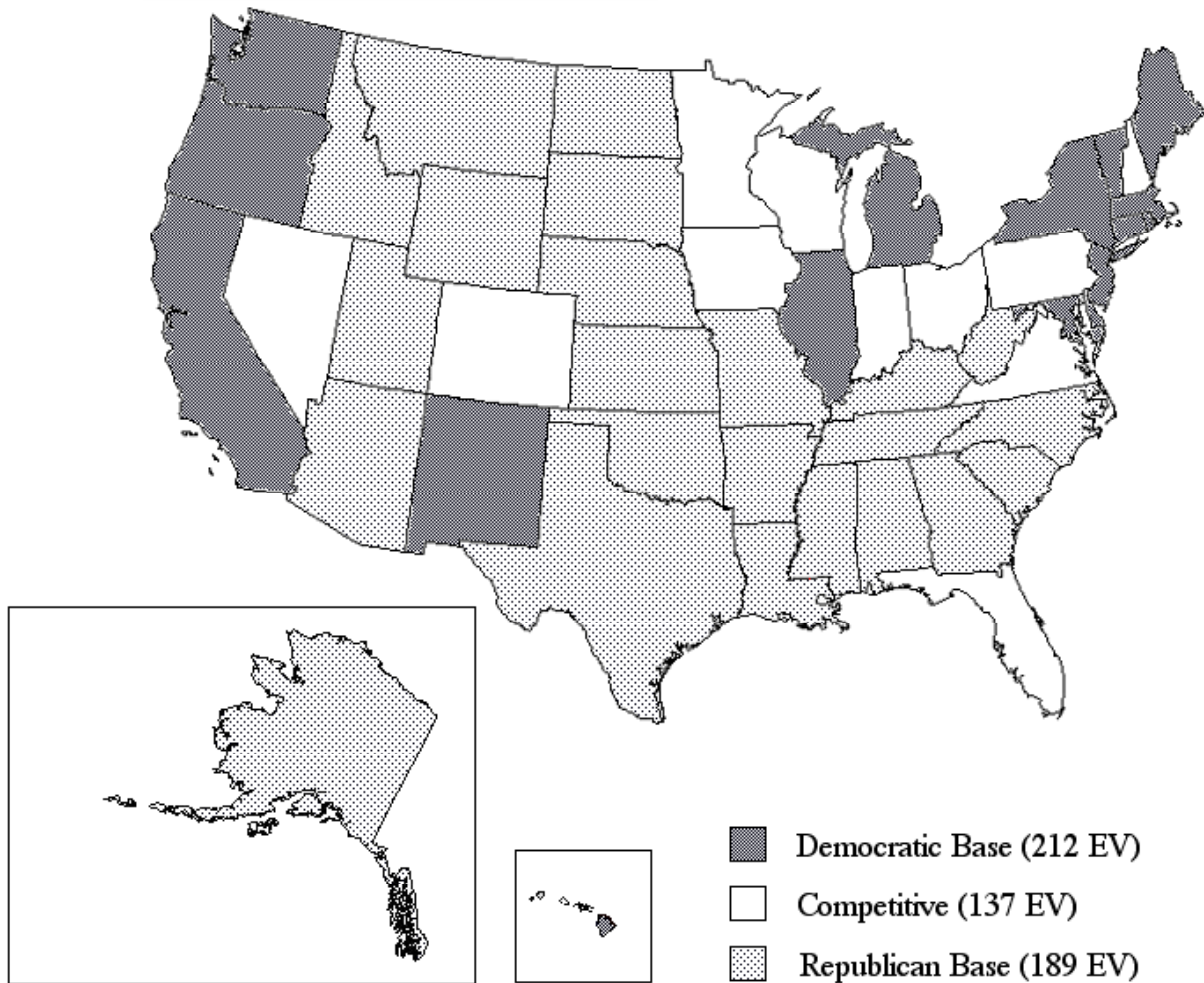
The political fortunes of the two major parties reversed abruptly between the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections. Widespread popular dissatisfaction with the economic performance and Iraq policy of the second-term Bush administration led to the downfall of the Republican majorities in both houses of Congress in the 2006 midterms, followed by a decisive Democratic presidential victory in 2008. Moreover, both parties' presidential candidates could plausibly claim to represent a dramatic break with the past: Democrat

**Figure 3.7**  
**State Alignments in the 2004 Presidential Election**



Barack Obama was a relatively youthful, first-term senator who adopted a theme of “change,” as well as the first African-American major-party nominee in American history, while Republican John McCain was a self-styled maverick Republican who had emerged during the 2000 Republican primaries as Bush’s chief rival within his party. Yet, as Figure 3.8 demonstrates, the state-level electoral outcomes in 2008 differed little from those of 2004 after controlling for a national tide in Obama’s favor. Forty-five states and the District of Columbia remained in the same categories as in 2004, with the modest movement that did occur further reducing the size of the competitive category to 25 percent of the total number of electoral votes.

**Figure 3.8**  
**State Alignments in the 2008 Presidential Election**



### **Electoral Stability in the Era of Polarization**

One of the key implications of rampant party-line voting by individual citizens—the norm in presidential elections from 1992 forward, as demonstrated in Chapter 2—is increasing stability in electoral outcomes at the state level, with the aggregate distribution of party identification in a state becoming a powerful predictor of the state’s likely alignment in the electoral college (Hopkins and Stoker forthcoming). In some cases, this distribution can change over time; as Chapter 2 revealed, a collective Democratic identification advantage existed in the red states as recently as the mid-1990s—a fading legacy of the South’s historically distinctive party politics. In general, however, aggregate

partisan distributions within states or regions are unlikely to shift dramatically from one election to the next. Party-loyal voting is therefore likely to result in durable alignments over time: states in which a majority of the electorate identifies with or leans toward the Democratic Party will tend to support Democratic presidential candidates across multiple elections, while states with a Republican advantage in party identification will likewise vote dependably for the GOP. This phenomenon presumably accounts for the consistency of the state-level results between 2004 and 2008, controlling for the short-term electoral forces that provided Bush a majority of the competitive states in 2004 but allowed Obama to sweep them four years later.

If this is so, the post-1992 era of party resurgence in the electorate should correspond with a period of relative stability in state-level outcomes. Figure 3.9 displays the share of states (and electoral votes cast by these states) that voted consistently more Democratic or more Republican than the national popular vote over each sequence of five consecutive presidential elections since the end of Reconstruction. By this measure, the five elections between 1992 and 2008 featured the highest level of aggregate stability in statewide voting alignments during the entire post-Reconstruction period; 75 percent of states, casting 79 percent of the electoral vote, voted either more Democratic or Republican than the national electorate in each of the five most recent presidential elections.

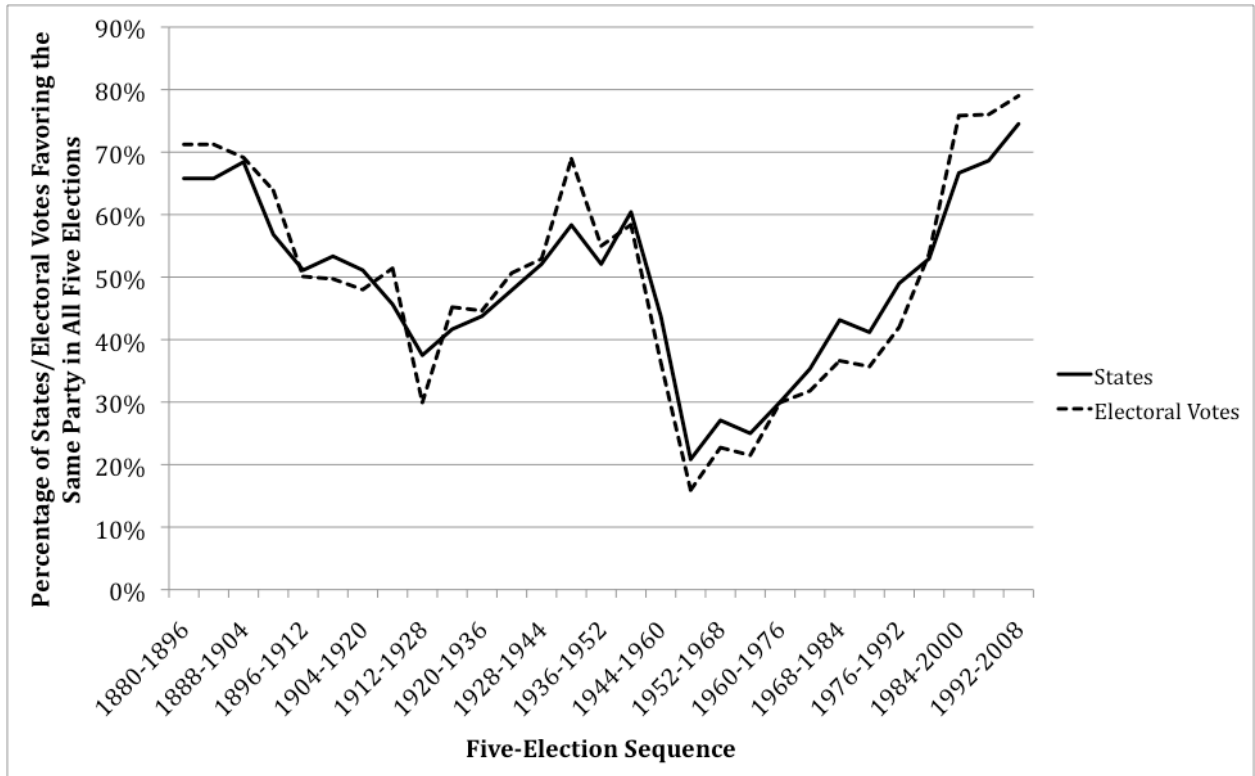
The pattern over the entire time series is instructive. State-level stability was relatively high during the late 1800s, corresponding to the Democratic reclamation of the South following the withdrawal of federal troops in the late 1870s and the relative Republican electoral advantage in the ex-Union North. It reached another peak from the 1930s to the 1950s: the Roosevelt/Truman regime followed by the Eisenhower elections, which represented a national swing toward the Republican Party more than a fundamental reordering of the parties' electoral coalitions. But the sharp drop in stability after 1960 and, especially, 1964 primarily reflects the South's sudden abandonment of its traditional Democratic loyalties just as the rest of the nation was moving towards the party. (The correlation coefficient between the state-level two-party vote shares in 1956 and 1964 is a remarkable -0.58.)<sup>2</sup> State alignments remained volatile for the next two decades, gradually stabilizing thereafter; by the 1980-1996 period, more than half of the states in the nation again demonstrated a consistently pro-Democratic or pro-Republican leaning across all five elections compared to the national electorate.

The analysis so far has largely focused on relative degrees of geographic variation and over-time stability while controlling for national electoral tides by comparing state-level electoral outcomes to the national popular vote division in each election. However, one of the implications of the popular claims of increasing geographic polarization is surely that state partisan alignments have become more pronounced and more consistent over time in an absolute sense as well. To journalists and commentators, "red" and "blue" states

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<sup>2</sup> This figure omits Alabama, where Lyndon Johnson was not listed on the ballot in 1964 due to opposition from state Democratic leaders to his civil rights policies. Excluding Mississippi as well, where Johnson appeared on the ballot but received only 13 percent of the popular vote, reduces the correlation to -0.38.

**Figure 3.9**  
**State-Level Partisan Stability in Presidential Elections, 1880-2008**  
**(Controlling for National Tides)**

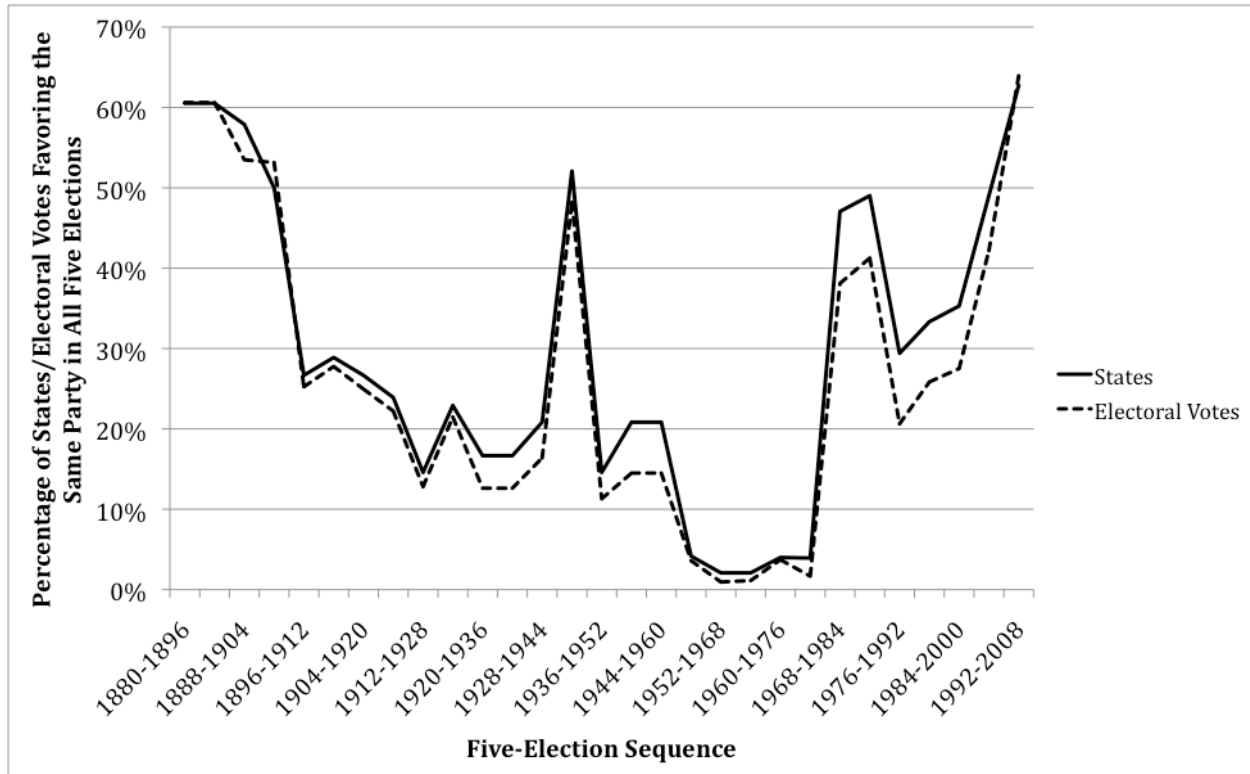


*Source:* Compiled by author.

are not simply states that vote significantly more Republican or Democratic than the national average, respectively, but states in which Republican and Democratic candidates receive more votes than their competitors. Had one party won a national landslide victory in 2000 by carrying 40 states or more, the notion of a deeply divided America would likely have failed to take hold among either political analysts or the general public, even if the relative state-level variation in outcomes had reached a historic peak.

Was the 1992-2008 period unusually stable in the absolute as well as relative partisan alignment of states in presidential elections? Figure 3.10 repeats the analysis from Figure 3.9 without controlling for national tides; here, the trend line represents the

**Figure 3.10**  
**State-Level Partisan Stability in Presidential Elections, 1880-2008**  
**(Not Controlling for National Tides)**



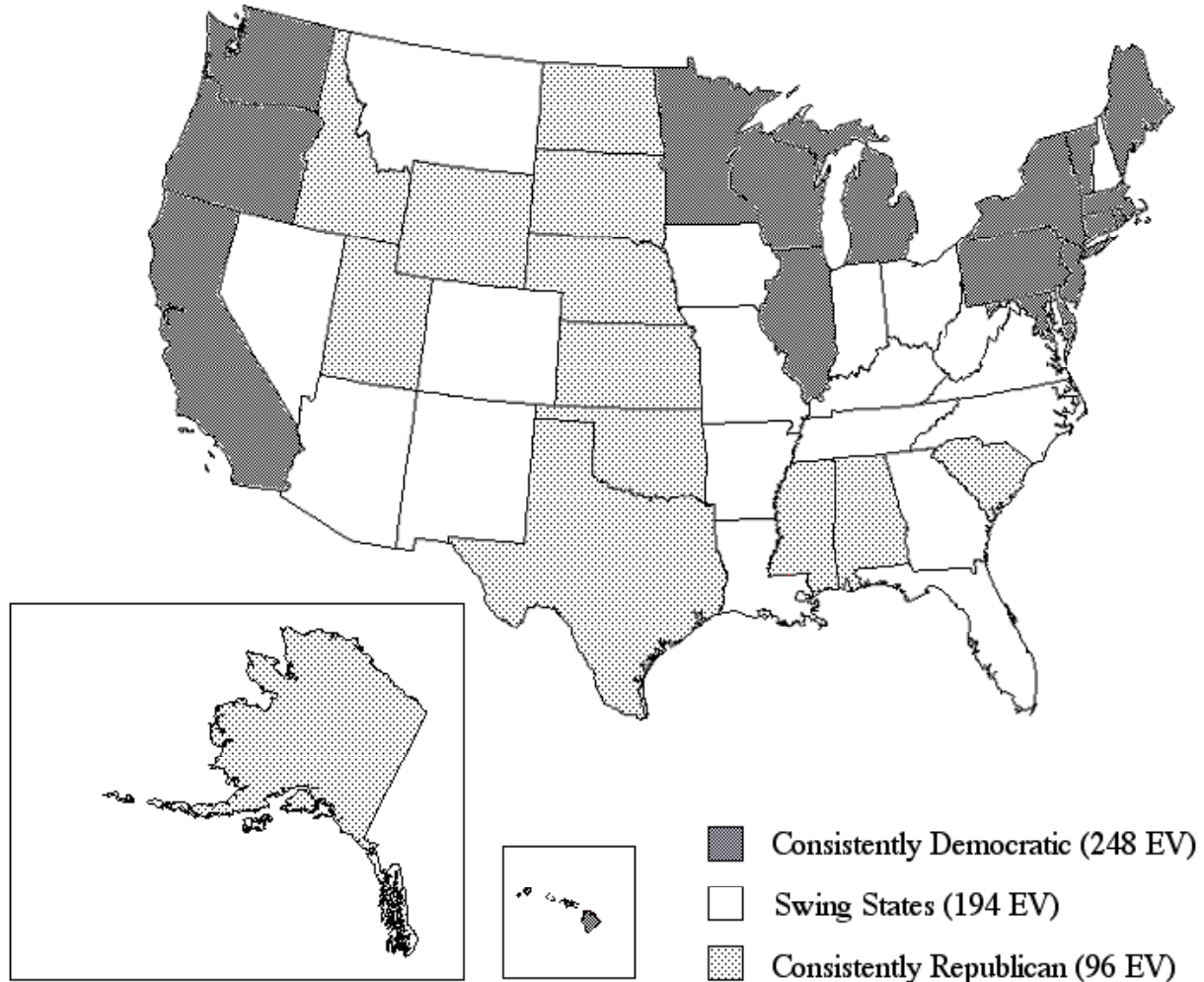
*Source:* Compiled by author.

proportion of states (and electoral votes cast by states) that voted for the same party's presidential nominees in all five of the elections in each sequence. The historical pattern is similar; absolute state alignments were relatively stable before the 1912 election, fell rapidly between 1912 and 1932 as the parties alternated power three times (with 1916 the only close election of the period), spiked temporarily as the Democrats won five consecutive elections by decisive margins between 1932 and 1948, and declined to minimal levels during the volatile party era of the 1960s and 1970s, rising gradually thereafter. Once again, the five most recent elections prove to be the most stable of the entire post-Reconstruction period; nearly two-thirds of the states delivered their electoral votes to the same party in each of the presidential contests between 1992 and 2008.

Figure 3.11 shows the partisan alignment of states in these five elections. Eighteen states and the District of Columbia, casting 248 electoral votes in total, supported the



**Figure 3.11**  
**State Partisanship in Presidential Elections, 1992-2008**



Democratic presidential nominee in each election between 1992 and 2008, while thirteen states, casting a collective 96 electoral votes, were consistently won by the Republican candidate. The Democratic advantage reflects the party's overall success during the 1990s and 2000s in presidential elections; Democrats placed first in the national popular vote four times, receiving at least 53.5 percent of the two-party vote in 1992, 1996, and 2008, while Republicans prevailed only once, winning 51 percent in 2004. As a result, several states that were classified as competitive or "purple" when controlling for national tides and were seriously contested by both campaigns, such as Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and

Minnesota, are part of the group of states that voted consistently Democratic over this period.

The presence after 1992 of a dependable Democratic electoral base supporting the party's presidential candidates across multiple elections stands in sharp contrast to the immediately preceding period in American political history. Aside from the District of Columbia, no state voted Democratic in each of the five presidential elections between 1972 and 1988, and only one—Minnesota—was carried four times by Democratic candidates over that period, while 24 states voted Republican in all five elections. Kevin Phillips's (1969) prediction of a durable national Republican majority in the wake of Richard Nixon's victory in 1968 had, by the late 1980s, appeared to have been fulfilled, at least in presidential elections. As Chapter 2 demonstrated, this Republican electoral success occurred despite the party's ongoing numerical disadvantage in identifiers within the American electorate; Democratic voters simply defected from their party's presidential candidates at high numbers nationwide in every election except 1976. The resurgence of party-line voting in 1992 and thereafter primarily benefited Democratic presidential candidates, with the increased collective loyalty of Democratic identifiers producing a safe geographic base for the party in the Northeast and Pacific Coast that did not exist in prior elections.

### **Party Change in Suburbia?**

One of Phillips's major claims, echoed by subsequent political analysts during the years of Republican dominance in presidential elections, was that the population growth of suburbia at the expense of major cities during the second half of the 20th century represented a serious threat to the political fortunes of the Democratic Party. As Phillips put it, "To many new suburbanites, their relocation represented a conscious effort to drop a crabgrass curtain between themselves and the . . . central cities. . . . [T]he burgeoning middle-class suburbs are the logical extension of the new popular conservatism" (Phillips 1969, 179, 184). Writing in the wake of the 1988 presidential election, the fourth landslide Republican victory out of the previous five elections, Schneider (1992) argued that "we are now a suburban nation with an urban fringe and a rural fringe," portraying failed Democratic nominees Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis as urban liberals who were hopelessly out of touch with modern suburban concerns and comparing them to the rural populist candidacies of William Jennings Bryan a century before, similarly doomed by the superior numbers of the opposition.

Bill Clinton's victories in the 1990s largely silenced these arguments by proving that the suburbanization of America did not necessarily preclude Democratic victories in presidential elections. The conventional wisdom of news media personalities ascribed this partisan reversal of fortune to Clinton's persona as a "New Democrat" who consciously distanced himself from urban liberalism. Clinton supported welfare reform and the death penalty, deliberately picked a public fight with Jesse Jackson over remarks by the fairly obscure hip-hop musician Sister Souljah, and famously shaped his campaign messages and proposals to appeal to "soccer moms"—the white suburban middle-class voters whom his strategists identified as key potential supporters. While these rebranding measures may

**Table 3.1**  
**Presidential Vote in the 20 Largest Metropolitan Areas, 1988-2008**

<b>Metro Area</b>	<b>2000 Population (in millions)</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>(2008- 1988)</b>
New York	21.1	50	58	66	65	60	64	14
Los Angeles	16.4	46	57	57	57	54	62	16
Chicago	9.3	50	60	63	60	60	68	18
Washington- Baltimore	7.5	50	60	59	59	59	65	15
Boston-Providence	7.1	52	60	67	63	61	61	9
San Francisco-San Jose	7.1	59	69	68	68	70	75	16
Philadelphia- Wilmington	6.2	48	59	63	61	60	65	17
Detroit	5.4	50	58	63	59	58	63	13
Dallas	5.2	39	45	44	38	38	45	6
Miami	5.0	46	57	64	61	59	62	16
Houston	4.7	42	46	46	41	41	46	4
Atlanta	4.4	39	50	49	45	44	51	12
Seattle	3.6	52	61	61	59	59	65	13
Phoenix	3.3	35	45	49	45	43	45	10
Minneapolis	3.1	55	59	61	53	53	57	2
Cleveland	2.8	54	59	62	58	59	61	7
San Diego	2.8	39	51	49	48	47	55	16
St. Louis	2.7	51	61	58	54	54	58	7
Denver	2.6	49	56	53	50	52	59	10
Pittsburgh	2.4	60	63	56	54	52	51	-9
<b>TOTAL: 20 Largest Metro Areas</b>	<b>122.9</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>REST OF NATION</b>	<b>158.5</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>4</b>

**Table 3.1**  
**Presidential Vote in the 20 Largest Metropolitan Areas, 1988-2008**  
**(continued)**

*Source:* Compiled by author using federal Metropolitan Statistical Area and Combined Statistical Area definitions.

*Note:* Figures represent Democratic percentage of the two-party presidential vote.

have accounted in part for the newfound electoral success of Clinton and subsequent Democratic presidential candidates after 1992, the results presented in Chapter 2 suggest that the growing role of social and cultural issues in influencing individual vote choice from 1992 forward are a key development in shaping the parties' contemporary electoral coalitions. Northern suburbanites who may have been receptive to Republican positions in the 1970s and 1980s on the issues of taxes, crime, or welfare appear to have become less attracted to the party as abortion, gay rights, religiosity, and related matters became a prominent axis of political conflict in the 1990s and 2000s.

Populous metropolitan areas where voters tend to be socially liberal moved disproportionately toward the Democratic Party in presidential elections from 1992 forward, as indicated by Table 3.1. Obama's candidacy in 2008 outperformed Dukakis in 1988 by twelve percentage points within the nation's 20 largest metropolitan areas and by just four points in the rest of the nation. While Democratic candidates routinely received lopsided popular margins within central cities during this period, the extent of their overall electoral success in these metropolitan areas would not have been possible without strong performances in suburban areas as well, given the population growth of American suburbia in recent decades. Between 1992 and 2008, Democratic presidential candidates received an average of 60 percent of the two-party vote in Westchester County, New York (metro New York); 56 percent in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania (metro Philadelphia); 52 percent in Oakland County, Michigan (metro Detroit); 54 percent in Bergen County, New Jersey (metro New York); 54 percent in Baltimore County, Maryland (which, despite its name, does not include the city of Baltimore); 52 percent in Fairfax County, Virginia (also metro Washington-Baltimore); 56 percent in Snohomish County, Washington (metro Seattle); and 64 percent in Contra Costa County, California (metro San Francisco). These are not unrepresentative examples. Overall, Democratic candidates received an average of 55

percent of the two-party vote in the suburban counties of the 20 largest metropolitan areas between 1992 and 2008.<sup>3</sup>

It is no coincidence that most of the large metropolitan areas where Democratic presidential candidates achieved consistent success in the 1990s and 2000s are located within the socially liberal blue states in the North and coastal West that has recently served as the party's geographic base, especially Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland, Illinois, Washington, and California, in addition to more competitive states that have nonetheless voted Democratic in most or all of the elections over this period, such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Hampshire.<sup>4</sup> The growth of geographic polarization in presidential elections over the past two decades has therefore principally benefited the Democratic Party by establishing a reliable group of electorally safe states built on the support of Democratic identifiers and social liberals in these states' voting populations. In congressional elections, however, the partisan implications of geographic polarization are quite different, as explored further in the next chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> Counties within metropolitan areas are classified as suburban if less than 50 percent of the county's population falls within one or more of the metropolitan area's central cities.

<sup>4</sup> The New York metropolitan area extends into New Jersey and Connecticut, metropolitan Philadelphia also includes portions of New Jersey, and metropolitan Boston extends into southern New Hampshire.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Geography and Party Asymmetry in the U.S. Congress**

The federal elections of 2008 represented an unambiguous triumph for the Democratic Party. Riding a wave of widespread voter dissatisfaction with the performance of departing President George W. Bush and his fellow Republican officeholders, Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama won a decisive 53 percent of the national popular vote, the best showing of any presidential candidate of either party in 20 years, and more than doubled his Republican opponent John McCain's share of the electoral vote, 365 to 173. Congressional Democrats built on the majorities captured in both chambers in the similarly favorable 2006 midterm elections, gaining 21 additional seats in the House and eight more seats in the Senate to achieve comfortable numerical advantages of 257-178 and 59-41, respectively. Neither party had won comparable simultaneous margins in the electoral college and Congress since the 1964 election preceding the enactment of Lyndon Johnson's landmark Great Society legislative program. Claiming a popular mandate for change, Obama took office in January 2009 amid widespread declarations that the magnitude of his party's electoral victory signaled the dawn of a new era of liberal ascendancy in American politics.

Within months of the new president's inauguration, however, such claims appeared premature, if not altogether misguided. While Obama and Democratic congressional leaders won passage of several major legislative items over the first two years of his term, it quickly became apparent that even wide margins of Democratic control in Congress could not guarantee success for the ambitious policy agenda of a liberal president. Obama's economic stimulus package won congressional approval only after significant reductions in its scope, while health care reform legislation—for decades, the Democratic Party's chief domestic policy goal—nearly succumbed to both inter-chamber and intra-party disputes, finally winning narrow passage in the House of Representatives on March 21, 2010 by a margin of 219 to 212 with 34 Democrats and every House Republican voting in opposition. (See Chapter 5 for a more thorough discussion of the 111th Congress's handling of health care reform.)

The growth of geographic polarization, as described in Chapter 3, has rendered an increasing number of congressional seats electorally safe for one party or the other during the past four decades. This trend has allowed members of Congress from both parties to shift farther to the ideological extremes over time without incurring significant electoral risk, contributing to the familiar picture of elite-level partisan polarization documented by a number of previous studies. Yet this ideological migration has not occurred in equal measure on both sides of the aisle. Since the early 1970s, congressional Republicans have moved much farther in the conservative direction than Democrats have moved toward the liberal pole, as measured by quantitative analysis of roll-call voting. While the moderate wing of the Republican Party has virtually disappeared from national office, a sizable bloc

of centrist Democrats remains, severely complicating the efforts of Democratic leaders to achieve unity around a shared policy agenda even in an age of ostensible party government in Congress.

This asymmetry, too, is rooted in the electoral trends of the past forty years. The declining number of congressional seats in which the parties are closely matched has increased the effective importance of the longstanding Republican structural advantage in congressional elections derived from the more efficient distribution of Republican voters across states and House districts. Democrats, more than Republicans, must elect members from constituencies that normally lean toward the opposition in order to compete for a national majority; because successful candidates in these constituencies tend to be ideologically heterodox, control of the chamber can only be achieved at the price of a divided party. Congressional Republicans, in contrast, have benefited from the increasing proportion of “red” states and districts over the past few decades; with no need to hold significant numbers of Democratic-leaning seats in order to achieve majority status in either chamber, Republican leaders have less incentive to recruit ideologically centrist candidates to contest these seats, or to tolerate deviation from the party line by moderate incumbents. The two parties’ ideological asymmetry on Capitol Hill therefore largely reflects their differing strategic challenges in assembling a national majority, which are in turn products of the interaction of the American electoral system with voting trends out in the nation at large.

### **The Congressional Parties and Unequal Polarization**

According to pundits and political scientists alike, the contemporary political era is distinguished chiefly by an unusually high degree of partisan polarization visible among political elites, especially members of Congress. Commentators frequently describe—and lament—the increasing ideological gap between Democrats and Republicans, usually implying that the two sides have contributed equally to the deepening partisan conflict apparent among elected officials since the 1970s. A typical column by the *Washington Post*’s David Broder, a regular critic of staunch partisanship in government, expresses frustration that the “centrist coalition of conservative Democrats and moderate Republicans that set Congress’s agenda for decades in the middle of the 20th century has been steadily depopulated by tugs from opposite political poles” (Broder 2004).

It has become increasingly clear, however, that the congressional parties are not ideological mirror images of each other pulling away at equally rapid rates from the political center. As Obama discovered in the early months of his presidency, many moderate Democrats remain in Congress even in an age of growing partisan polarization. These party centrists are wary of, if not outright opposed to, most major liberal policy initiatives and often seize opportunities to distance themselves publicly from the national Democratic leadership. When the Republican Party is in power, they regularly cross party lines to support opposition proposals; during periods of Democratic rule, they serve as obstacles to enactment of the party’s legislative agenda, often using their strategic power as the pivotal voting bloc in Congress to extract substantive policy concessions in exchange

for providing the necessary votes for passage—or, occasionally, to join with Republicans to outvote liberal Democrats on the floor.

At the same time, Obama's attempts during the first year of his presidency to pursue bipartisan support for his legislative agenda were frustrated by the near-extinction of the Republican Party's moderate wing over the past twenty years, leaving him few potential programmatic allies within an opposition party whose leadership adopted a strategy in the 2009-2010 Congress of confrontation rather than cooperation with the new president. While the significant Republican losses of 2006 and 2008 might have been expected to prompt a move by the party toward the ideological center in order to recapture the support of swing voters, following the logic of Downs (1957), the vast majority of congressional Republicans in office from 1992 onward have been conservatives elected from Republican-leaning states and districts who have little incentive, and exhibit little inclination, to shift the party's positions to the left. The significant and very public divisions within the congressional Democratic Party during its post-2006 tenure in the majority contrast dramatically with the remarkable party discipline displayed by Republicans over their previous twelve years of rule, even though Republican margins of control were substantially narrower in both houses of Congress throughout the period.

When this asymmetry between the parties is acknowledged, it is often ascribed to cultural differences between Democratic and Republican elites, with Democrats portrayed as naturally resistant to authority and prone to internal dissension while Republicans are said to value party loyalty and hierarchy (e.g. Freeman 1986). These characterizations have a long history, as reflected by the late humorist Will Rogers's famous quip from the 1930s, "I don't belong to an organized political party; I'm a Democrat." Traditionally depicted as a loose coalition of discrete, and sometimes conflicting, social groups, the Democratic Party in the electorate might also be assumed to be less ideologically unified than the Republicans, an expectation confirmed by Polsby and Mayer (1999), with elected Democrats' ideological factionalism simply reflecting the diverse views of their electoral supporters. To explain the rightward shift among Republicans, some observers have emphasized the rise of the organized conservative movement, in ascendance within the Republican Party since the nomination of Barry Goldwater for president in 1964, and its power in enforcing ideological discipline over elected Republican officials via networks of activists, think tanks, interest groups, and opinion leaders—with no equally unified, influential force on the left exerting a comparable pull in the opposite direction on congressional Democrats (Hacker and Pierson 2005, Perlstein 2001). Some exasperated liberals see the pernicious influence of political money in moderate Democrats' imperfect party loyalty; the Princeton University economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman suggested in mid-2009 that the debate over health care reform then occurring in Congress might reveal resistant centrist Democrats as "nothing but corporate tools, defending special interests" that supply them with campaign contributions (Krugman 2009).

It is possible that any or all of these factors contribute in part to the contemporary ideological asymmetry between the congressional parties. Yet these explanations overlook the powerful strategic incentives of both individual candidates seeking election or reelection to Congress and party leaders seeking to win an overall majority of seats in



order to gain procedural control of the chamber. Even in the arguably less disciplined Democratic Party, individual legislators face substantial pressure to remain party-loyal—from primary electorates, allied interest groups, and party colleagues and supporters. Members of Congress, whose behavior can so often be explained by the “electoral connection” (Mayhew 1974), presumably oppose proposals supported by the bulk of their party’s leadership and membership primarily when they perceive a substantial electoral benefit to defection—or, perhaps more commonly, a significant risk in toeing the party line. Party leaders in the House and Senate, while understandably eager to rally a unified party around a single legislative program, also seek to hold—or achieve—a national majority in order to control the chamber, and may perceive an unavoidable tradeoff between these goals. Attempts to enforce strict ideological discipline on members elected from vulnerable states or districts are counterproductive to the extent that such efforts endanger the party’s collective prospects for winning or maintaining majority status.

As might be expected, the centrist congressional Democrats who often differ with party leaders on prominent matters of public policy tend to represent Republican-leaning states and districts, especially in the L-shaped “red” territory composed of the South and interior West that serves as the Republican Party’s contemporary geographic base in national politics. The moderate wing of the Republican Party, in contrast, has traditionally been concentrated in the liberal Northeast and coastal West (with a few historical outposts in Democratic-leaning midwestern states such as Illinois and Minnesota), regions that now habitually support Democratic candidates in presidential elections. While both red and blue regions have become more likely since the 1980s to elect ideologically orthodox candidates of the prevailing party to Congress, at the expense of even maverick members of the opposition, the electoral strength of the moderate Democratic wing based in the South and interior West substantially exceeded that of the rapidly declining coastal-based moderate Republican faction even during the period between 1994 and 2006 when the Republican Party as a whole held majorities in both houses of Congress.<sup>1</sup>

The ideological asymmetry among party members in Congress therefore corresponds to similarly imbalanced electoral patterns among the mass public. For congressional Democrats, however, holding more seats which lean toward the opposition than the Republicans do is critical to the party’s ability to compete for a national majority in both chambers. The proportion of states and House districts favoring Republicans invariably exceeds the share of constituencies that lean Democratic (assuming that the parties are at roughly equal strength in the national electorate), requiring Democrats to compete much more effectively in politically hostile territory in order to gain a majority in Congress. As the number of highly competitive states and districts has declined over time due to growing geographic polarization within the electorate, this bias has increased in importance. With less incentive to hold, or even seriously contest, seats whose electorates lean toward the opposition, congressional Republicans are more free to impose ideological

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<sup>1</sup> Democrats temporarily maintained control of the Senate between June 2001 and December 2002 due to the defection of former Republican Jim Jeffords of Vermont.

discipline on their members without forfeiting the opportunity to gain a numerical majority.

In addition, the realignment of the South over the past several decades has affected the two parties very differently. Whereas the most conservative region of the nation was, for historical reasons, also the most loyal to the Democratic Party for nearly a century, leading to perennial internal conflict between northern and southern party factions, the rise of the Republican Party in the South beginning in the 1950s and 1960s made the parties more internally unified and comparatively distinct by subtracting moderate-to-conservative “Dixiecrats” from the Democratic Party and bolstering the right wing of the Republicans (Polsby 2004). This trend has had the curious effect of making the congressional Republican Party simultaneously larger and more conservative, seemingly contradicting the standard assumption that a tradeoff exists between a party’s size and its ideological purity. For Republicans, capturing additional Democratic-held seats representing constituencies in the South or rural West likely adds new conservative members to the party caucus, while challenging Democrats in more liberal districts elsewhere in the nation requires the party to support ideologically moderate candidates who cannot be counted on to exhibit strong party discipline if elected to office. As a result, the party places emphasis on gaining right-leaning seats represented by moderate Democrats, while Democrats in more liberal districts seldom face serious electoral challenge.

Congressional Democrats, by contrast, have observed many of their party’s southern members defeated or succeeded by conservative Republicans over the past forty years. Democrats who remain in Republican-leaning seats are keenly aware of their electoral vulnerability; many represent districts that reliably vote for Republican presidential candidates over the liberal Democrats nominated by the national party. To preserve their personal political standing, these members often perceive the need to demonstrate their independence from Democratic presidents and congressional leaders who may be fairly unpopular among their constituents. Unlike their Democratic counterparts, moderate Republicans have struggled to separate themselves from the southern conservative leadership of their party, and have suffered at the ballot box from northeastern and coastal western voters’ opposition to national Republican leaders.

These differences between the parties, derived from the political geography of congressional elections, may well also account for distinct party strategies that work to reinforce their ideological asymmetry. Congressional Democrats place a higher value on tolerating independence from party members who represent conservative constituencies and on recruiting ideologically heterodox candidates to contest Republican-leaning seats. Republican leaders, by contrast, tend to use their institutional power to enforce strict ideological discipline within the party (for example, in the assignment of committee chairmanships) and rarely devote great effort to competing in Democratic-leaning districts by recruiting moderate Republican challengers. Moreover, moderate Democrats in Congress have been more effective than their moderate Republican counterparts at establishing an electoral “brand” distinct from their party leadership, which may also have contributed to their relative success in the late 1990s and 2000s at holding constituencies that were shifting away from their party in presidential elections.

## The Case of the Vanishing Republican Moderates

The remarkable growth of party strength evident in the U.S. Congress since the 1970s is one of the most distinctive features of the contemporary political era. The “textbook Congress” of the mid-twentieth century, featuring autonomous committee chairs, a strict seniority system, relatively weak partisan offices, and an unofficial, though powerful, cross-party coalition that often prevailed over the majority-of-the-majority on floor votes (Manley 1973) has given way to a modern institution in which power is increasingly wielded by party leaders, especially the Speaker of the House, in service of an ambitious ideological agenda. Rohde (1991) has argued that the emergence of strong party government in Congress is a consequence of growing ideological unity within the parties and increasing distance between them, with unified party members more likely to grant significant institutional power to partisan leadership in order to pursue collective legislative goals.

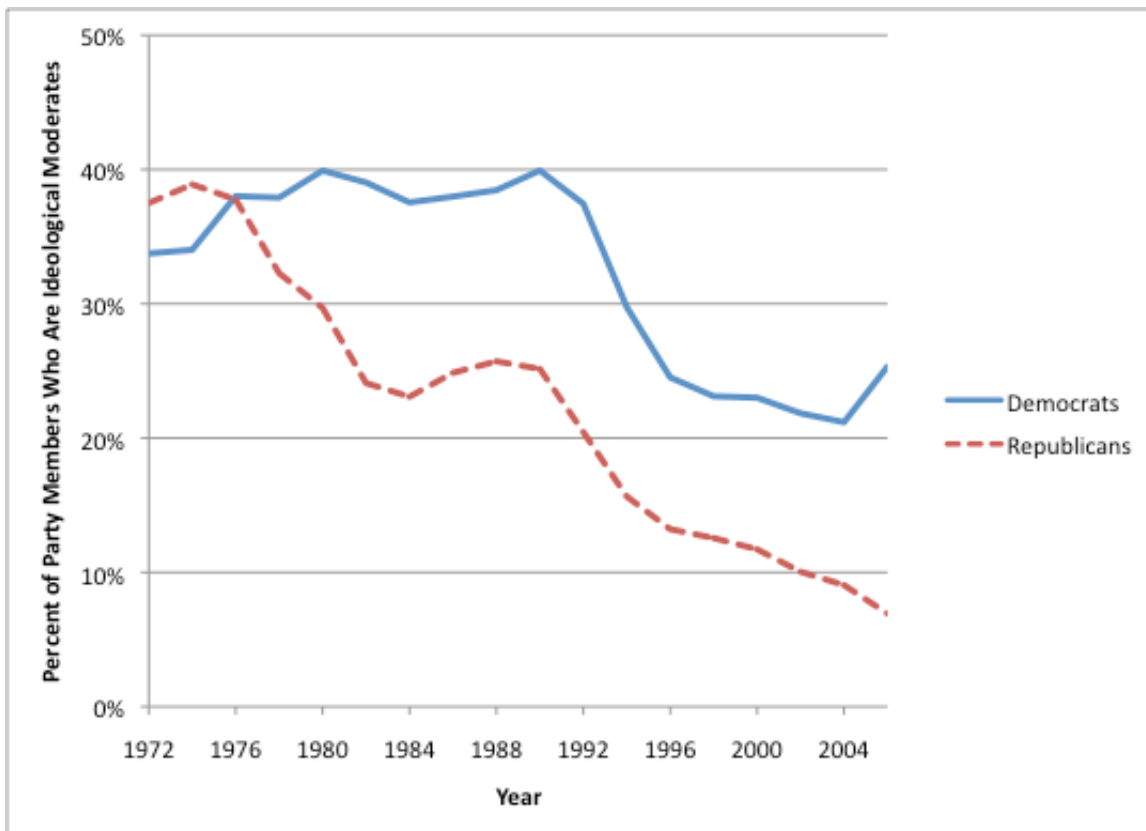
The number of philosophically moderate members of Congress who break from partisan orthodoxy to occupy a space near the center of the ideological spectrum has diminished in both parties over the past four decades (Fleisher and Bond 2004). But the decline has been much steeper among Republicans. Figure 4.1 displays the share of each party’s House membership composed of ideological moderates between the 93rd Congress (elected in 1972) and the 110th Congress (elected in 2006), as defined by NOMINATE common-space scores within 0.25 units of the overall mean during this period (see Poole and Rosenthal 2007).<sup>2</sup> Although the precise numerical cut point used here to assign members to ideological categories is unavoidably arbitrary, it reliably distinguishes members with well-known public reputations as party moderates (such as nearly all members of the Blue Dog Coalition of self-identified centrist House Democrats) from their more ideologically extreme colleagues. (The findings presented here remain robust under alternative definitions of ideological moderation.)

Figure 4.1 reveals distinct trends within the two parties. Republican moderates in the House of Representatives, who composed more than one-third of the party’s overall membership during the early and mid-1970s, constituted a declining proportion of the party beginning in the Congress following the 1978 midterm elections. Aside from a modest—and temporary—reversal during the mid-1980s, the moderate faction decreased in size at close to a linear rate in subsequent years, representing less than seven percent of the House Republican Conference by the 110th Congress elected in 2006. Six of the fourteen remaining moderate Republican incumbents retired or were defeated for

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<sup>2</sup> NOMINATE common-space scores represent measures of the ideological positions of members of Congress based on the outcomes of roll-call votes. They range roughly from -1 (the most liberal) to +1 (the most conservative). These scores are comparable across chambers and sessions of Congress. However, their calculation requires the constraint that the score of an individual member of Congress remains constant over his or her tenure in office unless that member switches party affiliations. As a result, these figures cannot account for polarization that occurs as a result of shifting vote patterns among individual legislators over time.

**Figure 4.1**  
**Share of Moderate Members Among Both Parties in the U.S. House, 1972-2006**



Source: NOMINATE data from Voteview website, <<http://www.voteview.com>>.

Note: Dates correspond to the Congress elected in the year displayed. “Moderate” members are defined as those with NOMINATE common space scores within 0.25 units of the overall mean score over the period (-0.010) or those outside that range but in the opposite direction from their party affiliation. Independent members are considered to be affiliated with the party with which they caucus.

reelection in 2008, almost certainly leaving an even smaller moderate bloc in the 111th Congress of 2009-2010.

While the steady disappearance of moderate Republicans from the House since the late 1970s conforms closely to the popular view of relentless party polarization over time, the pattern among Democrats is substantially more complex. Between 1972 and 1990, the

share of moderates within the House Democratic Party actually *increased*, from 34 percent to 40 percent of the party caucus. The relative size of the moderate faction declined sharply between 1990 and 1996, but stabilized thereafter at between 21 and 25 percent of the party as a whole. The proportion of centrist Democrats increased once again after the 2006 election (and likely after 2008 as well), reflecting the party's success at capitalizing on a favorable political environment by electing additional moderate candidates in normally Republican-leaning congressional districts. As a result, the difference in size between the parties' corresponding moderate wings has widened over the past 20 years; Democratic moderates outnumbered their Republican counterparts in the House by a margin of 59 to 14 in the 2007-2008 Congress.

In the Senate, ideological moderates have similarly proved much more politically long-lived within the Democratic Party than among Republicans. Figure 4.2 summarizes the relative shares of moderate members within the Senate parties over the same period. During the 1970s, the moderate faction of the Republican Party consistently included more than 40 percent of the party membership—a greater fraction than among Democrats. After 1980, however, the proportion of moderate senators declined at a steeper rate within the GOP; by 1994, a substantial difference had emerged between the parties that continued to widen in more recent elections. Only six moderate Republicans remained in the Senate after 2006 (as compared to 12 moderate Democrats), and this dwindling contingent has subsequently declined still further in size. Three of the six were defeated for reelection in November 2008 and a fourth, Arlen Specter, defected to the Democrats four months later, leaving only Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, both of Maine, as senators representing the party's rapidly disappearing centrist wing.

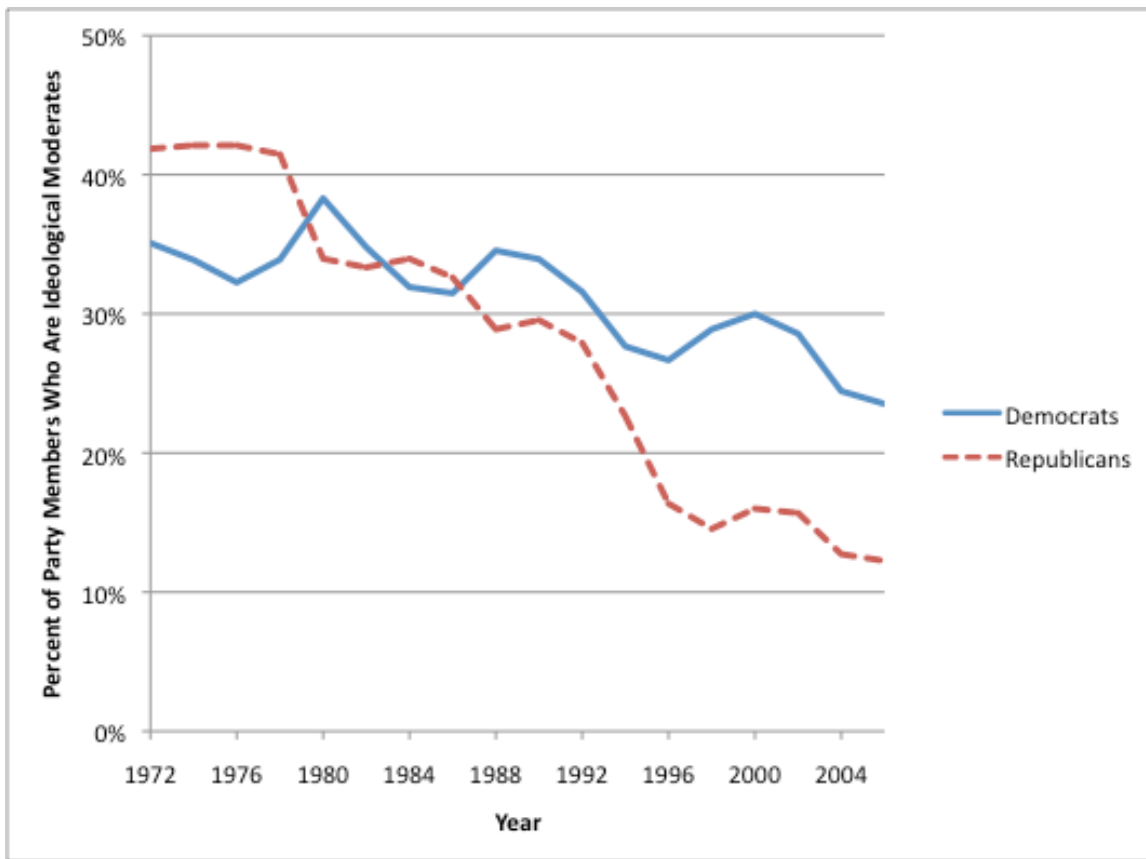
The analyses of spatial data presented here confirm the existence of long-standing—and increasing—ideological asymmetry between the contemporary congressional parties. As journalists, activists, and analysts increasingly recognized during the first years of the Obama administration, the Blue Dog Coalition of centrist House Democrats, along with like-minded senators such as Max Baucus of Montana and Ben Nelson of Nebraska, effectively held the balance of power in Congress between Democratic liberals on one side and an almost monolithically conservative congressional Republican Party on the other.<sup>3</sup> Though Obama pledged to govern in a less partisan spirit than his immediate predecessor, the presence of a significant bloc of moderate members solely on the Democratic side of the aisle has ironically made the goal of seeking bipartisan support for his policy agenda even more difficult to fulfill for him than it was for George W. Bush, who managed to attract substantial support from moderate Democrats for most of his most prominent legislative initiatives.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 also reveal another important difference between the contemporary parties. One might expect a tradeoff to exist between a party's size and its ideological purity, with favorable electoral waves for one side washing into office a number of moderate members from marginal districts while reducing the opposition to its base of

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<sup>3</sup> The presence—and increasing use—of the filibuster in the Senate ensures the strategic power of moderate Democrats even when the party holds a healthy overall majority, as it did in the 2009-2010 session of Congress.

**Figure 4.2**  
**Share of Moderate Members Among Both Parties in the U.S. Senate, 1972-2006**



Source and Note: See Figure 1.

partisan strongholds represented by ideological loyalists. For most of the past forty years, however, congressional Republicans have grown in numbers even as they have collectively turned toward the ideological right. As the figures make clear, the Republican electoral gains of 1978-1980 and especially 1992-1994 bolstered the conservative wing of the party in both houses of Congress, presumably because the newly-captured seats were in large part concentrated in Republican-leaning “red” areas of the United States. This potential relationship between geography and ideology is explored further in the next section.

## Regional Polarization and Ideology in Congress

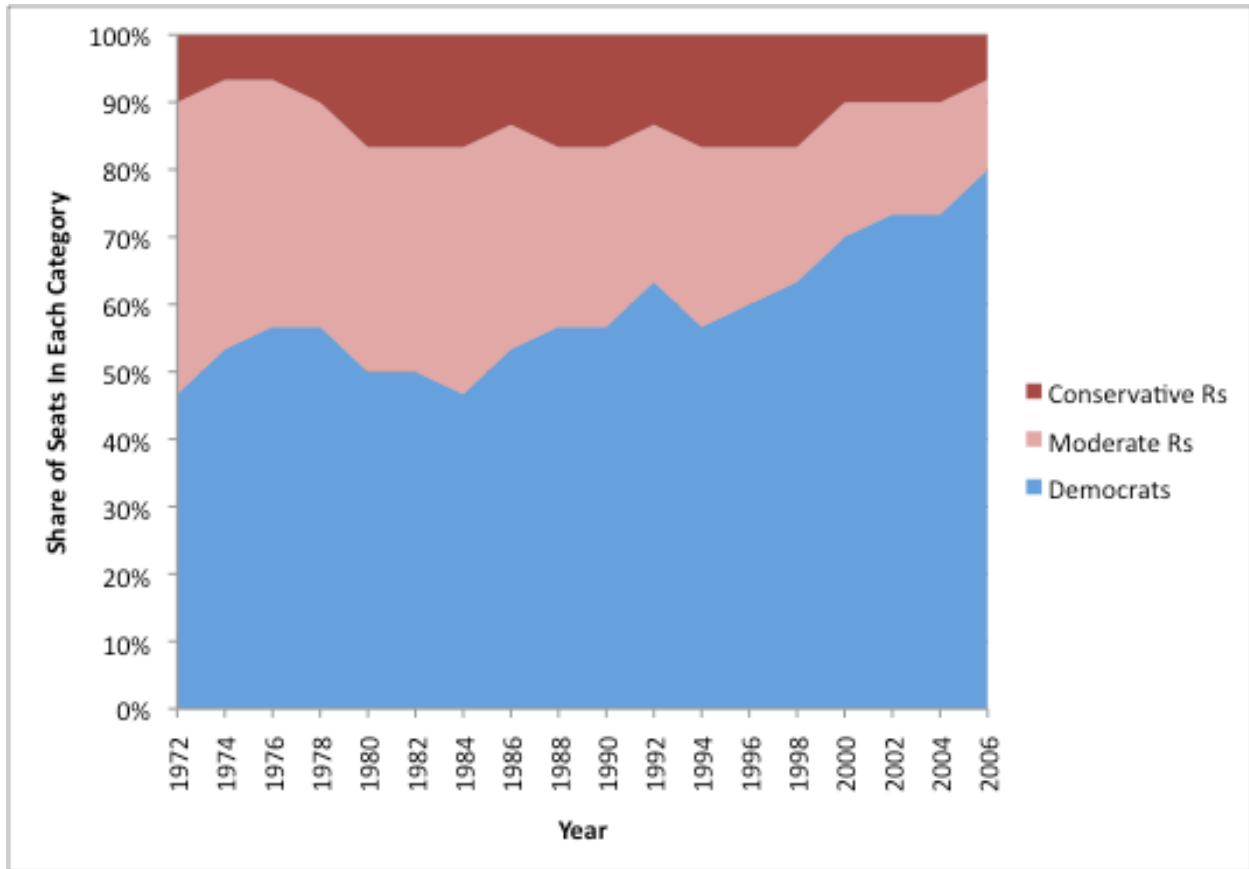
Throughout American history, ideological factionalism within the parties has almost invariably occurred along geographic lines. For the better part of a century, intraparty conflict between liberal and moderate Democrats divided the party between its northern and southern wings (Key 1949). Though the Republican Party has generally been portrayed as relatively unified in comparison, a persistent ideological division has long existed between moderates from the coasts and conservatives from the nation's interior, as illustrated by presidential nomination battles between Thomas E. Dewey and Robert Taft in 1948 and between Nelson Rockefeller and Barry Goldwater in 1964 (Rae 1989).

Rockefeller, in particular, was so closely identified with the moderate wing of the GOP during his long period of prominence in national politics (lasting from his election as Governor of New York in 1958 to his retirement as Vice President in 1976) that like-minded colleagues were commonly identified as "Rockefeller Republicans." But he was far from the only well-known adherent of moderate Republicanism during the 1960s and 1970s. The faction was particularly well-represented in the U.S. Senate during this period, with nearly all of its members representing states in the Northeast or along the Pacific Coast; notable examples included Lowell Weicker of Connecticut, Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, Jacob Javits of New York, John Chafee of Rhode Island, Richard Schweiker and John Heinz of Pennsylvania, and Mark Hatfield and Bob Packwood of Oregon.

The liberalization of the Democratic Party in Congress over the past half-century is commonly traced to the replacement of maverick "Dixiecrats" with conservative Republicans as the "solid South" fractured from the 1960s forward, leaving a more unified—if smaller—congressional party (Rohde 1991; Polsby 2004). A similar trend may well be occurring in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states, which are traditionally conservative but have often elected moderate Democrats to office in the past. Does the even more abrupt decline of the moderate wing of the congressional Republican Party over the same period have similar roots in the shifting party loyalties of voters? The changing partisan alignment of the Northeast and Pacific Coast is increasingly apparent in recent presidential election results, as detailed in Chapter 3, with the regions combining to anchor a stable and reliable geographic base for Democratic presidential candidates beginning in the 1992 election. Has the relatively liberal electorate of these regions responded to the growing conservatism of the national Republican Party by supporting liberal Democrats in congressional elections as well, at the expense of moderate Republican incumbents?

Figure 4.3 displays the proportion of Senate seats from the Northeast and Pacific Coast held by conservative Republicans, moderate Republicans, and Democrats from the 93rd Congress (elected in 1972) to the 110th Congress (elected in 2006). (For purposes of visual simplification, Democrats are not divided into ideological categories; however, over 90 percent of Senate Democrats from these two regions were ideological liberals in each Congress included in the figure.) In 1972, the number of Republicans slightly exceeded the number of Democrats within the future geographic base of Blue America, with Republican moderates outnumbering conservatives by a ratio of more than four to one. However, Senate Democrats claimed a steadily growing share of seats over time beginning in the 1986 election; these gains came disproportionately at the expense of moderate Republicans. By 2006, Democrats held 80 percent of the Senate seats from the Northeast

**Figure 4.3**  
**Share of Senate Seats Held by Conservative and Moderate Republicans and Democrats, Northeast and Pacific Coast Regions, 1972-2006**



*Source:* Compiled by author; categories based on NOMINATE data.

*Note:* Regional definitions as follows:

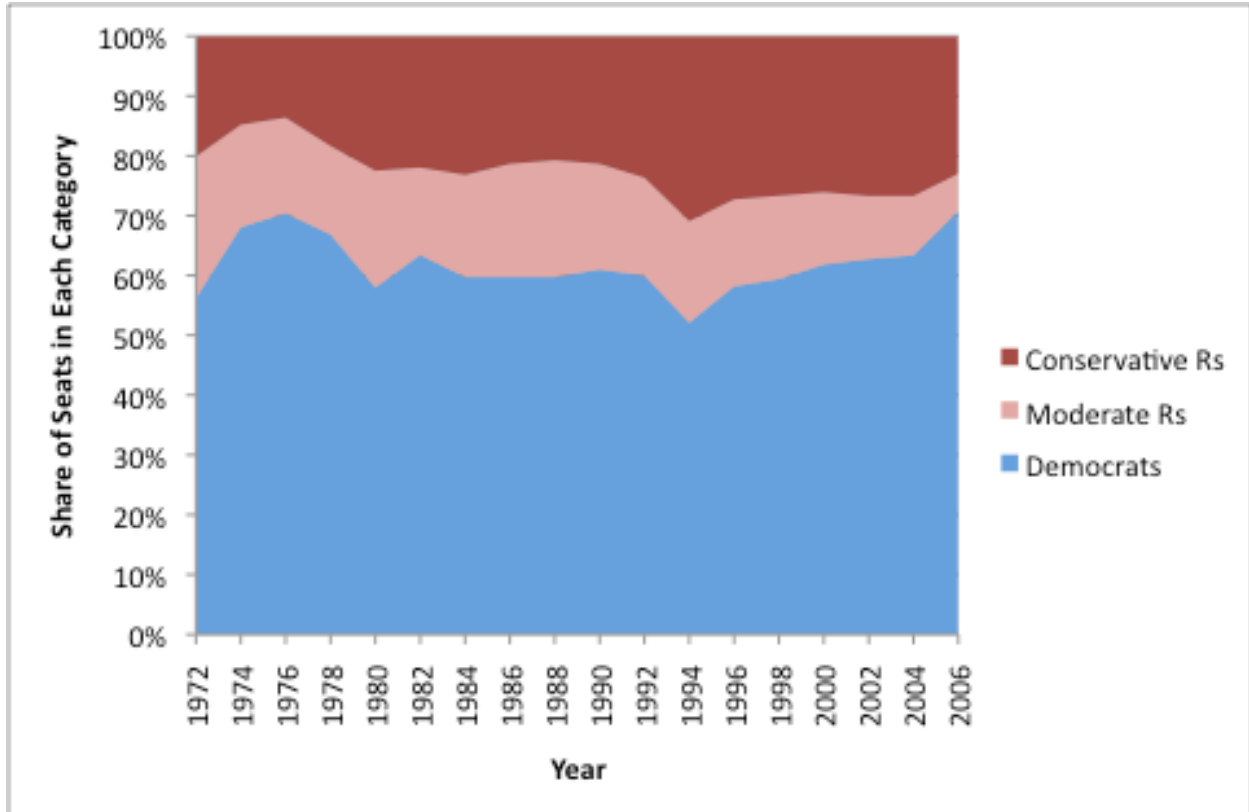
Northeast: Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont

Pacific Coast: California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington

and Pacific Coast; the party's share rose still further, to 87 percent, after the 2008 election (not shown).



**Figure 4.4**  
**Share of House Seats Held by Conservative and Moderate Republicans**  
**and Democrats, Northeast and Pacific Coast Regions, 1972-2006**



*Source and Note:* See Figure 4.3.

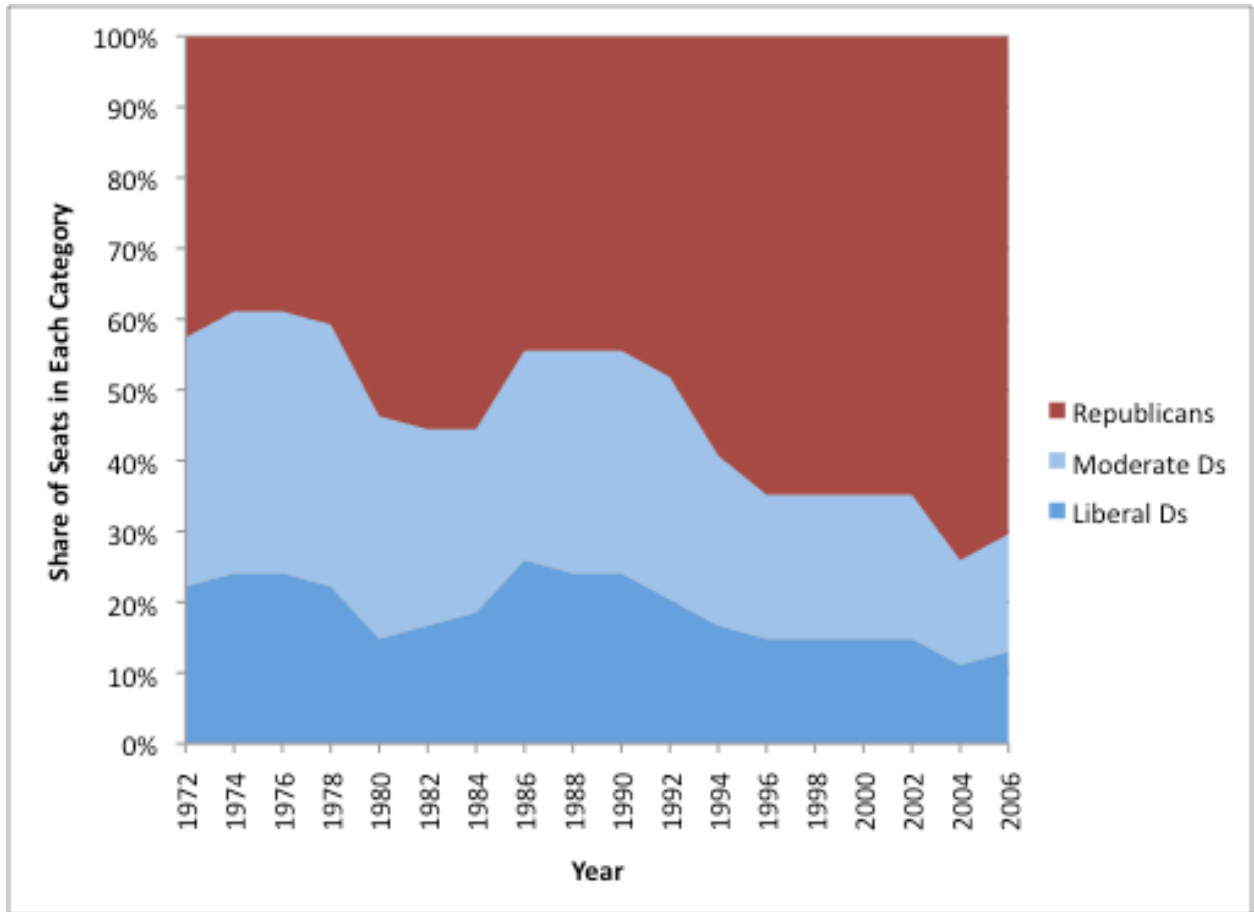
Figure 4.4 summarizes the distribution of northeastern and coastal western House seats among Democrats and both ideological categories of Republicans over the same period. The proportion of seats in these regions held by conservative Republicans is consistently higher than in the Senate, reflecting the existence of reliably Republican enclaves at the district level even within generally Democratic-leaning states (such as central Pennsylvania, northwestern New Jersey, sections of upstate New York, and much of the California interior). Even so, moderates still constituted roughly half of the combined House Republican delegation from the Northeast and Pacific Coast as late as 1990; by 2006, however, they were outnumbered nearly four-to-one by conservatives. In contrast to the

Senate, conservative House Republicans have also gained seats in these two regions over time, with the total share of seats held by conservative Republicans increasing from an average of 20 percent during the 1972-1992 period to 27 percent thereafter. When combined with the significant gains made by House Democrats in these regions since the 1994 election—the party increased its share of seats from 52 percent of the total in 1994 to 71 percent in 2006, rising further to 75 percent in 2008 (not shown)—this trend has effectively squeezed moderate Republicans from office even in the regions of the nation where they once found significant electoral success.

The comparison with Democrats elected from the South and interior West is instructive. Figure 4.5 displays the proportion of Senate seats held by liberal Democrats, moderate Democrats, and Republicans within the nation's two currently Republican-leaning regions over the same period (virtually all Republicans from the South and rural West are ideological conservatives). Republicans have clearly made substantial gains over time in the South and West at the expense of moderate Democrats—especially when the party captured the Senate majority in 1980 (an increase largely, if temporarily, reversed when the same seats came up for election in 1986) and again from 1992 to 1996. After 1996, however, the trend largely stabilized. Unlike their Republican counterparts, moderate Democrats did not appear to be on the brink of vanishing by the 2006 election; within these two regions, in fact, they continued to outnumber party liberals. Though the size of the party's moderate bloc decreased substantially in the early 1990s due to Republican electoral gains, the enduring success of a critical mass of southern and western party moderates in subsequent elections allowed Senate Democrats to compete for majority status despite the disadvantage created by the permanent overrepresentation of thinly-populated, Republican-leaning states in the upper chamber. Because the South and interior West collectively elect 54 senators (compared to just 30 elected by the Northeast and Pacific Coast), the Republican Party could theoretically gain a national majority without holding a single seat outside of its L-shaped "red" geographic base. Democrats' ability to elect moderates in Republican-leaning states such as Louisiana, South Dakota, and Nebraska has therefore been critical to the party's capacity for achieving control of the Senate.

Figure 4.6 presents the same data for House members from the South and interior West. Here, the proportion of seats held by liberal Democrats remained remarkably stable—between 18 to 22 percent—across the entire period. As in the Senate, Republican gains over time occurred at the expense of the moderate Democrats who were once the modal partisan/ideological category from the two regions. Yet Republican advances were almost entirely concentrated in a short duration of time in the early 1990s. After 1996, the distribution of House incumbents from the South and rural West remained quite stable, with Republicans (who were ideological conservatives almost without exception) constituting about six out of ten members and the remaining share of seats about evenly split between moderate and liberal Democrats. Again, the southern/western moderate wing of the congressional Democratic Party appears far from vestigial—its numbers actually increased in 2006, and probably did so again in 2008—in contrast to its rapidly vanishing Republican counterpart.

**Figure 4.5**  
**Share of Senate Seats Held by Liberal and Moderate Democrats and Republicans,**  
**South and Interior West Regions, 1972-2006**



*Source:* Compiled by author; categories based on NOMINATE data.

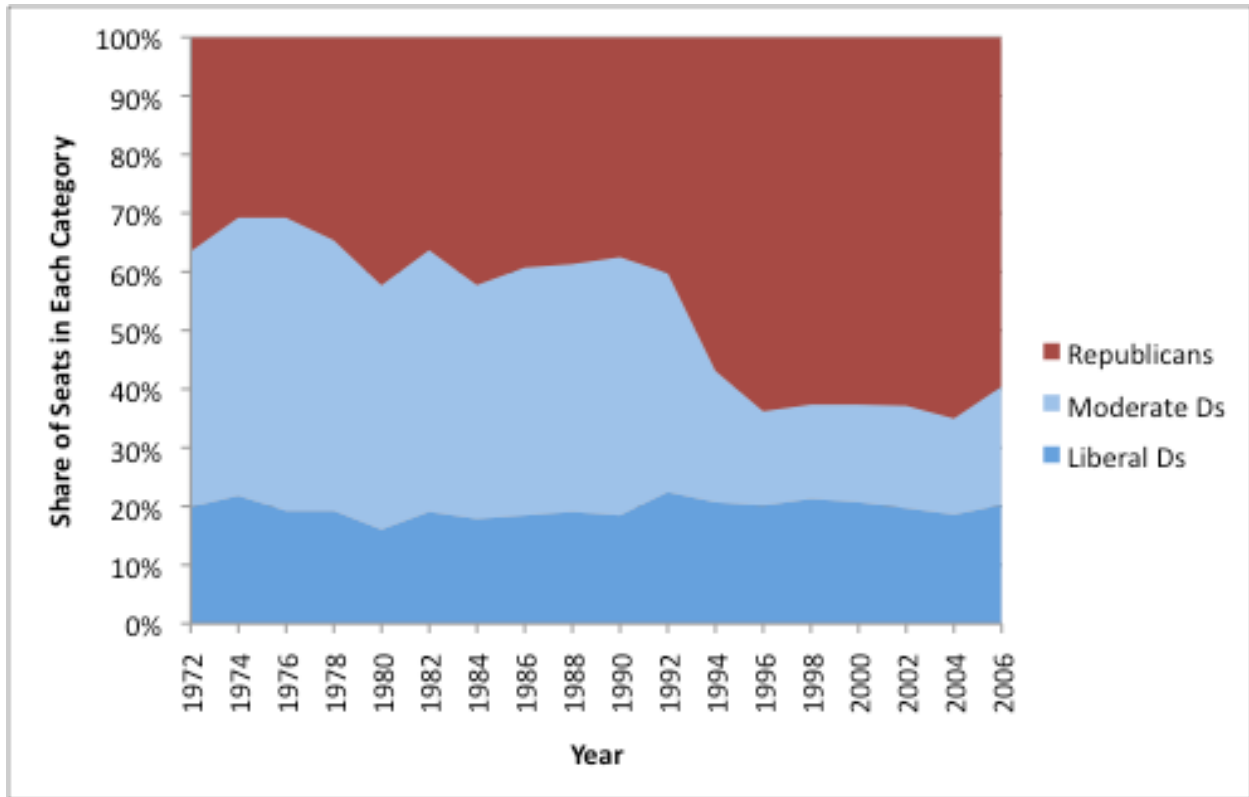
*Note:* Regional definitions as follows:

South: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia

Interior West: Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming

The partisan realignment of the South is often portrayed as a relentless electoral force set in motion by Lyndon Johnson's approval of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, when he

**Figure 4.6**  
**Share of House Seats Held by Liberal and Moderate Democrats and Republicans,**  
**South and Interior West Regions, 1972-2006**



*Source and Note:* See Figure 4.5.

allegedly remarked that he was signing away the South for his party for a generation, and proceeding steadily ever since. While the region has, for the most part, become reliably Republican territory in presidential elections (with the notable exceptions of Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia, all narrowly carried by Obama in 2008) and mostly Republican in House and Senate contests as well, it continues to elect a significant number of moderate Democrats to Congress, with the large Republican gains of the mid-1990s having largely stalled thereafter. Over the past decade, partisan change in congressional elections has been predominantly concentrated not in the conservative South and interior West, but in the traditionally liberal Northeast and Pacific Coast—where the once-formidable bloc of

**Table 4.1**  
**Comparison of Party and Ideology of 1972 Incumbents with Party of 2008**  
**Incumbents Within Congressional Seats**

<i>HOUSE</i>				
<b>1972 Incumbent</b>	<b>2008 Incumbent:</b>	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Rep</b>	<b>Pct Dem</b>
Liberal D		112	27	80.6
Moderate D		35	43	44.9
Moderate R		36	24	60.0
Conservative R		43	63	40.6
 <i>SENATE</i>				
<b>1972 Incumbent</b>	<b>2008 Incumbent:</b>	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Rep</b>	<b>Pct Dem</b>
Liberal D		27	10	73.0
Moderate D		8	12	40.0
Moderate R		15	3	83.3
Conservative R		9	16	36.0

*Source:* Compiled by author.

*Note:* House districts total 383 because other seats were reapportioned between states and thus cannot be compared over time.

moderate Republicans has faded from view in favor of lopsided Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress.

The previous four figures indicate that moderate Democrats from the South and interior West have collectively lost seats to conservative Republicans over the past four decades, while moderate Republicans from the Northeast and Pacific Coast have been largely replaced by liberal Democrats during the same period. Table 4.1 confirms this pattern at the level of individual seats in both houses by comparing the ideology and party of members of Congress elected in 1972 to the party of the incumbent holding the same seat following the 2008 election. In the House, decennial redistricting has altered the numbers and boundaries of districts, complicating efforts to identify corresponding seats over time; by consulting district maps and election results, each 1972 district has been matched with its closest 2008 counterpart. (Some districts have been created—and abolished—due to the reapportionment of House seats among the states; these are not comparable and are therefore dropped from the analysis.) As Table 4.1 shows, 60 percent of districts held by moderate Republicans in 1972 had elected Democrats by 2008. In the Senate, this partisan change has occurred with even greater magnitude: of the 18 Senate seats held by moderate Republicans after the 1972 election, 15 were held by Democrats after 2008. While a majority of seats formerly held by moderate Democrats were in

Republican hands in both houses of the 2009-2010 Congress, the party's centrist bloc remained substantially more robust in size than its counterpart on the other side of the aisle.

For ideological liberals, the enduring presence of a significant number of moderate Democrats may not appear to be an unmixed blessing. As the next section demonstrates, however, it is critical to the party's ability to compete for a national majority, due to partisan bias in the apportionment of House and Senate seats.

### **The Size and Persistence of Partisan Bias in Congressional Elections**

In 2008, Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama defeated his Republican opponent, John McCain, by 7.27 percentage points in the national popular vote, placing first in 28 of 50 states and 242 of 435 congressional districts. In the previous election, Republican incumbent George W. Bush had outpolled Democrat John Kerry by only 2.46 percentage points in the popular vote, but carried 31 states and 255 House districts. In 2000, Bush lost the national popular vote to Al Gore by 0.51 points, yet still won 30 states and placed first in 238 of the congressional districts drawn after the 2000 census.

These results reveal the structural bias favoring Republicans in congressional elections. Put simply, Republican voters are distributed more efficiently across states and congressional districts than are Democratic voters, who tend to be overconcentrated in a smaller number of seats. As a result, more Democratic votes are "wasted" within constituencies that are already electorally safe for the party, leading to an overall preponderance of Republican-leaning seats (assuming a "normal" national popular vote divided evenly between the parties).

As Table 4.2 shows, the number of overwhelmingly Democratic districts, as measured by the difference between the district-level 2008 presidential vote and the national popular vote, substantially exceeds the number of heavily Republican seats. Barack Obama ran at least 20 percentage points ahead of his national vote share in 57 districts, compared to 23 for John McCain. Twenty-four districts are more strongly Democratic, as measured by the presidential vote, than the most Republican seat in the nation.

This imbalance did not emerge suddenly in the last three elections. Using the normalized mean presidential vote in the state or district over the decade as an indicator of its underlying partisanship, Table 4.3 displays the share of seats in each chamber that are "red" (leaning Republican), "purple" (closely divided) or "blue" (leaning Democratic) in each of the past four decades. (From this point forward, I will use the popular "color" terminology to refer to the underlying partisan composition of a constituency, as measured by the normalized presidential vote, and the terms "Republican" or "Democratic" to refer to the party holding the seat in Congress.)

Table 4.3 reveals that red states and districts have consistently outnumbered blue seats in both houses of Congress since the 1970s. While the margins of difference have not changed dramatically over time (as displayed in the right-hand column), the proportion of both red and blue seats has increased substantially at the expense of competitive "purple" states and districts, reflecting the increasing variation (across districts) and stability

**Table 4.2**  
**Republican Voters Are Distributed More Efficiently Than Democrats:**  
**Presidential Vote by House District, 2008 Election**

<b>Difference Between District Vote for President and Total National Popular Vote</b>	<b>Pro-Democratic Seats</b>	<b>Pro-Republican Seats</b>
0-3 %	42	37
4-5 %	14	28
6-9 %	35	55
10-19 %	57	87
20-29 %	33	18
30-39 %	22	5
40+ %	2	0
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>205</i>	<i>230</i>

*Source:* Compiled by author.

(within districts) of partisan voting in national elections, as noted in Chapter 3 (see also Hopkins 2005, 2009; Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; Oppenheimer 2005). As a result, the practical effect of the Republican electoral bias has increased. While congressional Democrats could potentially overcome this disadvantage in the 1970s by winning a reasonable majority of seats that were closely divided between the parties, the greater number of red states and districts (and decreasing proportion of purple constituencies) virtually required after 2000 that Democrats hold a substantial number of Republican-leaning seats in order to compete for a national majority. If Republicans succeeded in electing candidates in every red seat during the 2000s, the party would need to win only 17 of 74 purple districts in the House and 5 of 28 purple seats in the Senate in order to achieve control of Congress without holding a single blue seat in either chamber.

As a matter of necessity, then, congressional Democrats must compete more strongly in Republican-leaning red states and districts than Republicans do in blue seats. Figure 4.7 displays the proportion of red, purple, and blue House districts won by Democrats from 1972 to 2008. The share of red districts held by Democrats consistently

**Table 4.3**  
**The Republican Structural Advantage in Congressional Elections, 1972-2010**

<b>Decade</b>	<b>Pct Blue Seats</b>	<b>Pct Purple Seats</b>	<b>Pct Red Seats</b>	<b>(Red-Blue)</b>
<i>House</i>				
1972-1980	29.7	33.5	36.8	7.1
1982-1990	30.1	31.0	38.9	8.8
1992-2000	33.7	25.5	40.9	7.2
2002-2010	37.1	17.0	45.9	8.8
<i>Senate</i>				
1972-1980	12.0	54.0	34.0	22.0
1982-1990	18.0	50.0	32.0	14.0
1992-2000	24.0	34.0	42.0	18.0
2002-2010	26.0	28.0	46.0	20.0

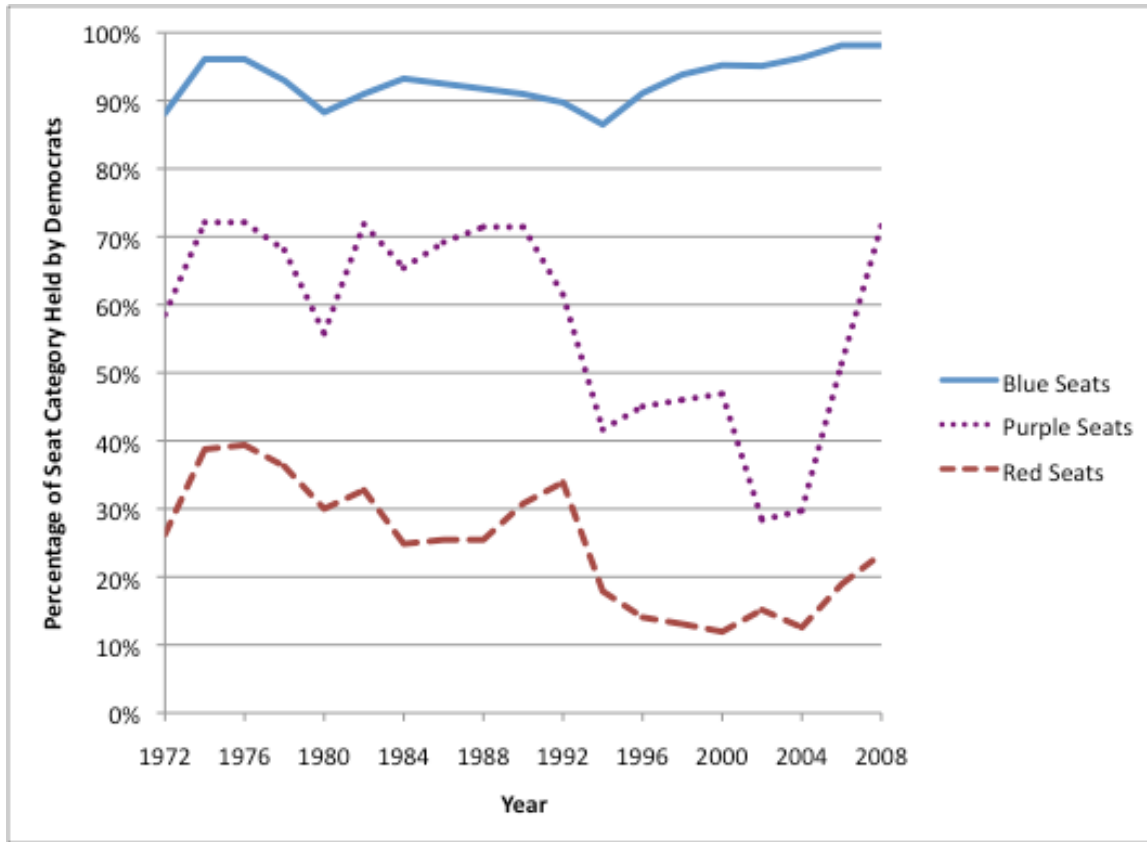
*Source:* Compiled by author.

*Note:* “Blue” seats are those in which the two-party presidential vote within the state or district is, on average, more than three percentage points more Democratic than the national popular vote distribution during the decade listed. “Red” seats are on average more than three percentage points more Republican than the national presidential vote; all other seats are “purple.”

exceeds the share of blue districts held by Republicans over the entire period, even during the twelve years of Republican control from 1994 to 2006. While Republicans succeeded in capturing a greater share of red seats beginning in 1994, this trend was reversed in the Democratic “wave” elections of 2006 and 2008, leaving more than 20 percent of red seats in Democratic hands in the 2009-2010 Congress. Meanwhile, the Republican share of blue districts, while never large, nearly disappeared entirely during the 2000s, declining from a high point of 14 percent immediately after the election of 1994 to a low of just 2 percent in both the 110th and 111th Congresses. Because red seats consistently outnumber blue seats overall, the higher share of red seats held by Democrats translates into an even greater preponderance of red-seat Democrats over blue-seat Republicans in the House. At its narrowest, this gap was 12 seats immediately after the 1994 election (32 to 20); the 111th Congress includes 47 red-seat Democrats and only 3 blue-seat Republicans.



**Figure 4.7**  
**Party Control of U.S. House Seats by Presidential Vote, 1972-2008**

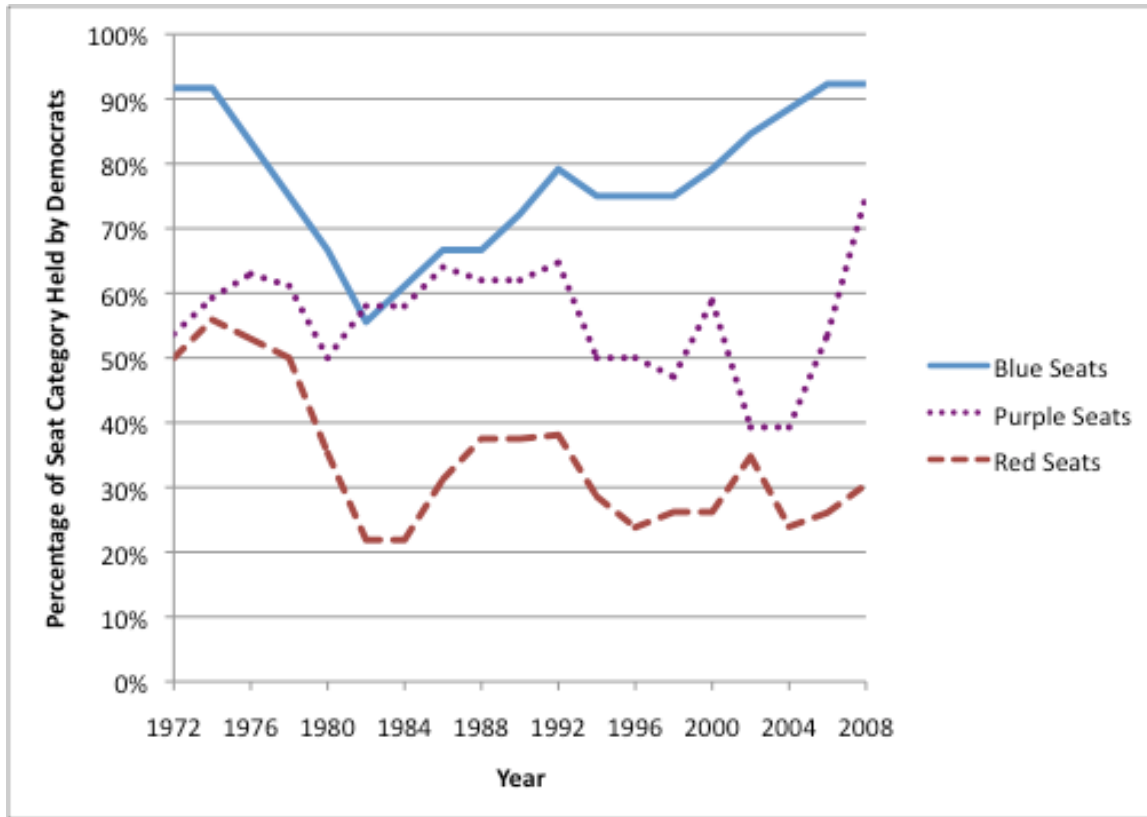


*Source:* Compiled by author.

*Note:* For seat category definitions, see Table 4.3.

Figure 4.8 repeats this analysis for Senate seats. While Senate Republicans were considerably more successful at holding Democratic-leaning seats in the 1970s and 1980s than their counterparts in the House, the pattern in the 1990s and 2000s resembled that of the lower chamber. In the period after 1996, Democrats consistently held between 25 and 30 percent of red-state Senate seats, while the share of blue seats won by the party increased to over 90 percent in 2006 and 2008. Because red states outnumber blue states by a substantial margin (see Table 4.3), the difference in terms of raw seats is even more substantial. Fourteen Senate Democrats in the 111th Congress represented Republican-

**Figure 4.8**  
**Party Control of U.S. Senate Seats by Presidential Vote, 1972-2008**



*Source:* Compiled by author.

*Note:* For seat category definitions, see Table 4.3.

leaning states, while only two Republicans—the two senators from Maine—were elected from blue states.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This number was increased to three when Republican Scott Brown won a special election in Massachusetts in January 2010.

## Polarization and Constituency in the U.S. Congress

We have seen that moderate Democrats now substantially outnumber moderate Republicans in both houses of Congress, and that Democrats consistently hold a larger share of Republican-leaning seats than Republicans hold of seats normally favoring Democrats. These trends are potentially related, of course, to the extent that members of Congress elected from constituencies that usually lean toward the opposing party tend to be ideological centrists. While this is a fairly uncontroversial assumption, Figures 4.9 and 4.10 confirm that the partisan leanings of House members' districts exert a consistently powerful influence on their voting records.

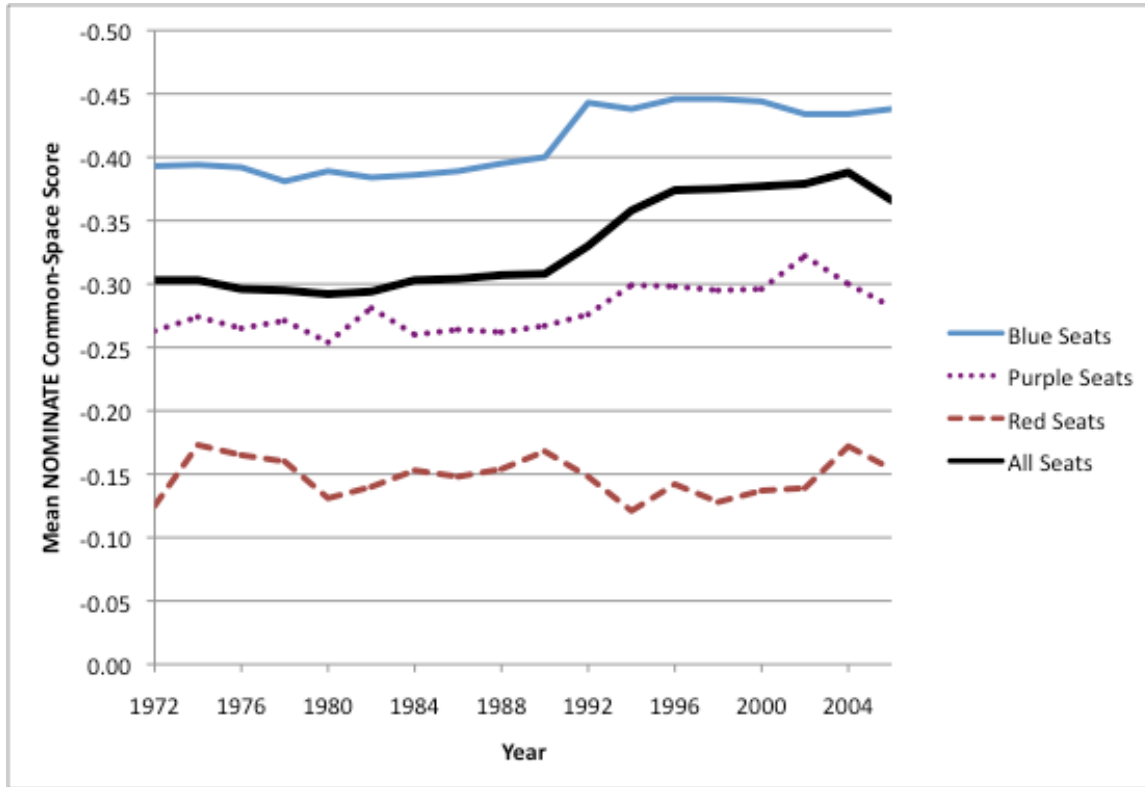
Figure 4.9 plots the mean NOMINATE common-space score for Democratic House members elected from red, purple, and blue districts over the 1972-2006 period; Figure 10 does the same for House Republicans. As Figure 4.9 shows, Democratic members representing blue districts are perennially more liberal than those elected from purple districts, who are in turn more liberal than red-seat Democrats. Democrats from blue districts have become collectively somewhat more liberal since 1972, as have (to a slightly lesser extent) purple-seat Democrats. Democrats from red seats, however, have remained virtually unmoved, with a consistent mean score of roughly -0.15. The overall drift to the ideological left among House Democrats (thick line) is therefore primarily due to the shift among members elected from blue and purple seats, in combination with the increase over time in the proportion of House Democrats who represent blue seats (as the number of these seats increases—due to geographic polarization within the electorate—and as such seats become more likely to elect Democrats to Congress).

As Figure 4.10 reveals, House Republicans elected from red seats have shifted dramatically to the ideological right over the 1972-2006 period. Purple-seat Republicans, though they remain more moderate in comparison, have also moved in the conservative direction at nearly the same rate. (The perennially small number of blue-seat Republicans explains the wide year-to-year variation within that category.) The overall party mean closely tracks that of Republicans elected in red seats, demonstrating the extent to which the congressional party has historically been dominated by members from Republican-leaning constituencies.

Together, Figures 4.9 and 4.10 indicate that members in both parties representing party strongholds or competitive seats have become more ideologically extreme since the 1970s. In 1972, 27 percent of Democrats elected within blue or purple districts were moderates, as were 35 percent of Republicans elected within purple or red seats. By 2006, these figures stood at 12 percent and 6 percent, respectively. With both parties increasingly electing party loyalists within friendly or even closely-divided districts, moderates in Congress increasingly represent districts that normally favor the other party. As anticipated in the previous section, moderate Democrats now outnumber moderate Republicans primarily because the Democratic Party has been far more successful in recent years at holding red seats than the Republicans have been at retaining blue seats.

Figures 4.11 and 4.12 present mean ideology by state partisan alignment for Democrats and Republicans in the Senate. In both cases, it appears that the ideological divergence of the parties is due less to trends within seat categories than to the increasing proportion of senators who represent states aligned with their own party. (The unusually

**Figure 4.9**  
**Mean Ideology of House Democrats, 1972-2006**



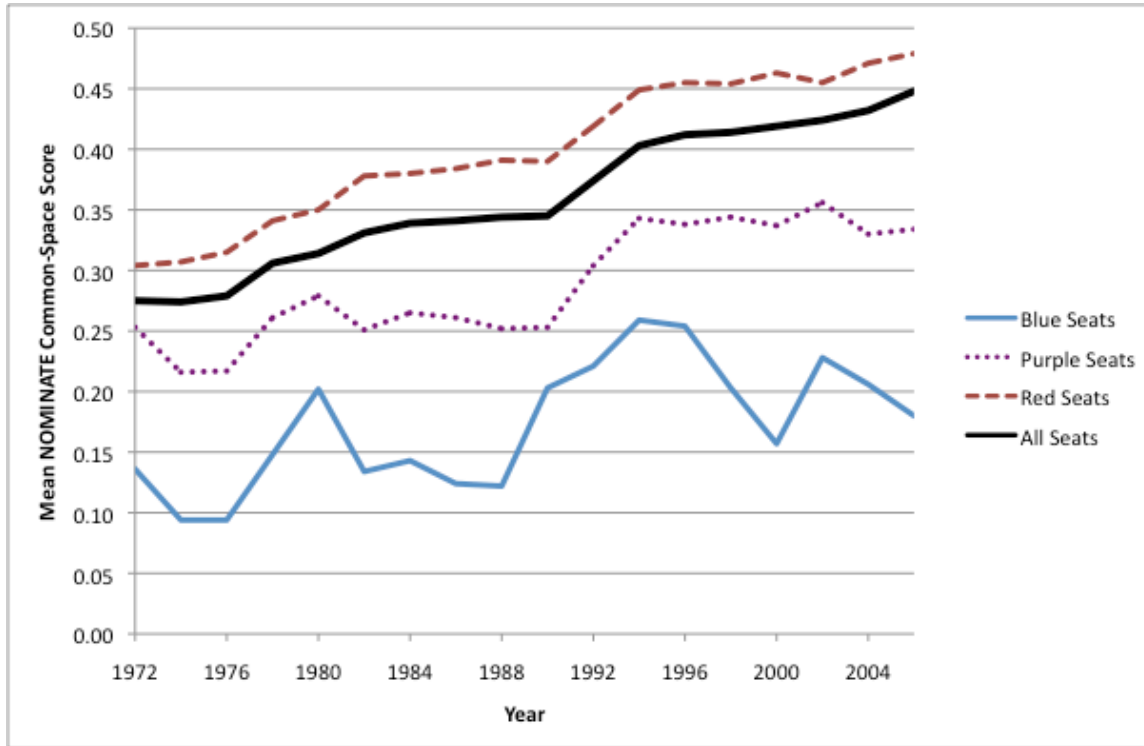
Source: Compiled by author; NOMINATE data from <<http://www.voteview.com>>.

liberal score for blue-state Senate Republicans during the 1972-1976 period is an artifact; only one senator, Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, fell into this category in 1972 and 1974. Brooke was joined in 1976 by John Chafee of Rhode Island.)

In some ways, the parties have undergone similar changes since 1972. As blue-seat Democrats move collectively leftward and red-seat Republicans shift to the right, districts that favor one or the other party in presidential elections are now very unlikely to elect a moderate member of that party to Congress. In the 110th Congress elected in 2006, 148 of 157 House Democrats representing blue seats were ideological liberals, while 160 of 163 red-seat Republicans were conservatives; in the Senate, 22 of 24 blue-state Democrats were liberals, while 33 of 34 red-state Republicans were conservatives.

The contemporary ideological asymmetry between the parties, then, derives principally from the continued success of congressional Democrats at holding a significant number of Republican-leaning states and districts, as measured by the presidential vote. Such success is necessary for the party to compete for an overall majority in Congress, due

**Figure 4.10**  
**Mean Ideology of House Republicans, 1972-2006**



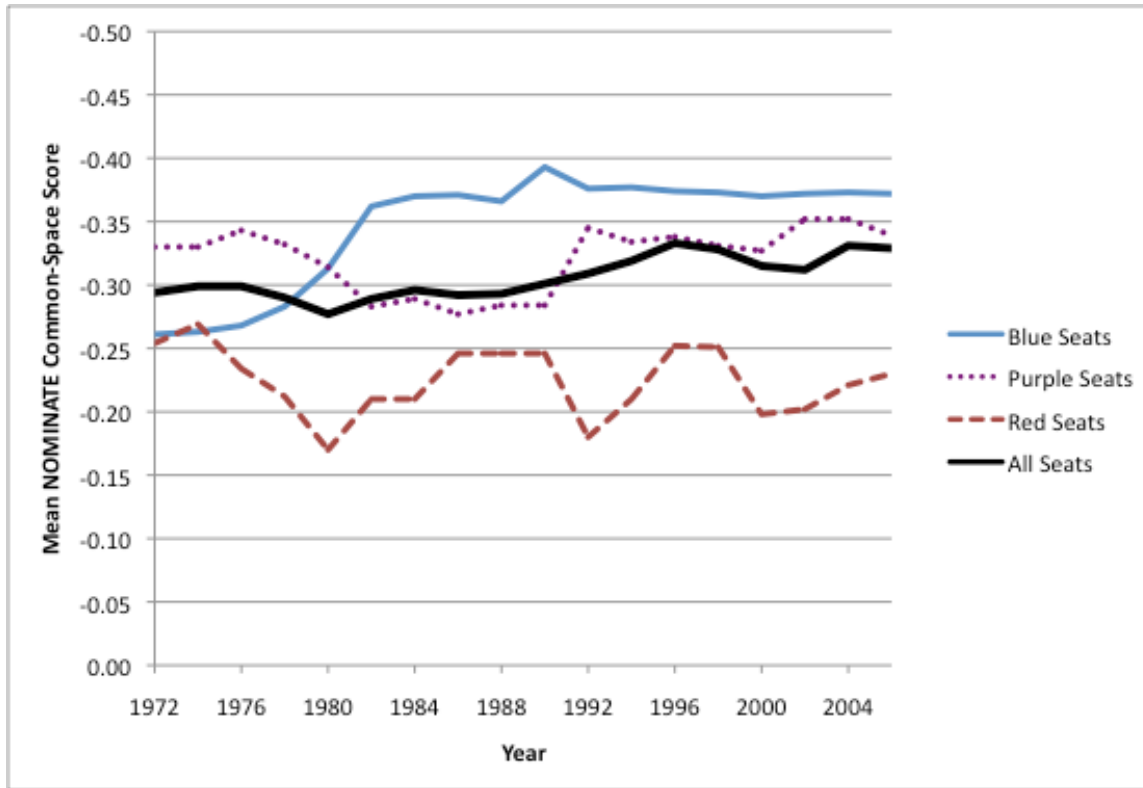
Source: See Figure 4.9.

to the greater number of pro-Republican constituencies. But the Democrats elected from these seats are significantly more moderate than those elected from safe party bastions, resulting in a less ideologically unified congressional party in comparison to the overwhelmingly conservative GOP.

Of course, the underlying partisan leanings of states and districts often evolve over time. A number of southern districts, for example, may have been classified as “purple” or even “blue” on the basis of the presidential vote in the 1970s but have since migrated into the safely “red” column. Likewise, much of the Northeast and Pacific Coast was competitive or even slightly Republican-leaning four decades ago but is now safely Democratic in federal elections (see Chapter 3).

Table 4.4 demonstrates the changing partisan alignments of voters within these regions over the past four decades, as measured by the mean presidential vote distribution in the states and districts. In 1972, 42 percent of House seats and 13 percent of Senate seats within the Northeast and Pacific Coast were “blue,” or clearly Democratic-leaning in

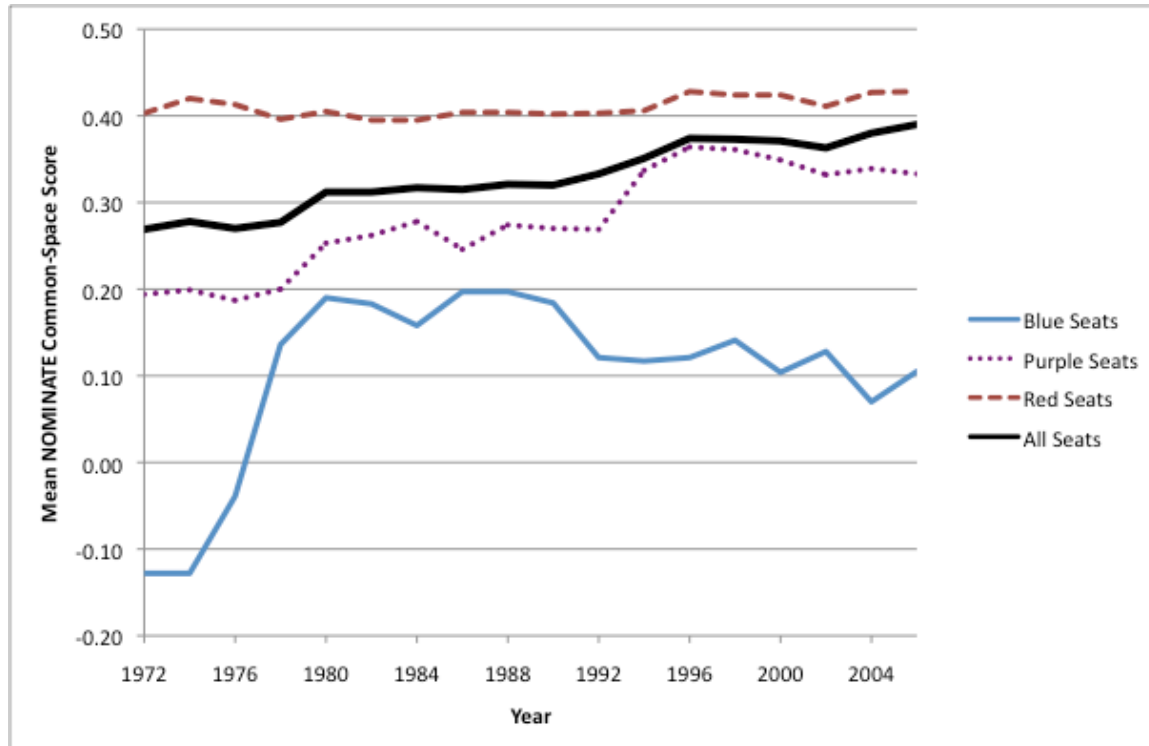
**Figure 4.11**  
**Mean Ideology of Senate Democrats, 1972-2006**



Source: See Figure 4.9.

presidential elections; by the 2000s, these figures had increased to 60 percent and 80 percent, respectively. In the South and interior West, the share of pro-Republican “red” seats increased over the same period from 46 percent in the House and 56 percent in the Senate to 73 percent and 81 percent, respectively. In both cases, the increasing dominance of the prevailing party in each pair of regions has come primarily at the expense of “purple” or competitive seats, which constitute a steadily shrinking share of constituencies in both houses. While the trend toward safe party seats is often popularly attributed to increased rates of partisan gerrymandering, its presence in the Senate as well as the House suggests instead that variation and stability in electoral outcomes are increasing within geographic units irrespective of the manner in which district boundaries are drawn and redrawn (see also Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006).

**Figure 4.12**  
**Mean Ideology of Senate Republicans, 1972-2006**



Source: See Figure 4.9.

The data presented here clearly indicate that congressional Republicans have had more to fear than Democrats in recent elections from a constituency shifting toward the opposition. The chronically low number of elected Republicans from blue states and districts—recently approaching trace levels in both houses of Congress—suggests that even a veteran Republican incumbent may find his or her hold on a seat increasingly tenuous once it begins to clearly favor Democrats in presidential elections. The defeats during the 2000s of several well-known moderate Republicans representing Democratic-leaning constituencies, including Chris Shays and Nancy Johnson of Connecticut, Jim Leach of Iowa, Connie Morella of Maryland, and Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, appear to confirm this generalization. While an unfavorable short-term political environment for Republicans

**Table 4.4**  
**Party Alignments of House and Senate Seats in Democratic and Republican Regions of the U.S., 1972-2008**

<i>NORTHEAST &amp; PACIFIC COAST: HOUSE</i>						
Year	Pct Seats Blue	Pct Seats Pur	Pct Seats Red	Pct Blue Held by D	Pct Pur Held by D	Pct Red Held by D
1972	42	32	26	86	48	18
1982	34	36	30	91	66	30
1992	51	30	19	88	43	13
2002	60	18	22	96	24	3
2008	60	18	22	99	69	14
<i>NORTHEAST &amp; PACIFIC COAST: SENATE</i>						
Year	Pct Seats Blue	Pct Seats Pur	Pct Seats Red	Pct Blue Held by D	Pct Pur Held by D	Pct Red Held by D
1972	13	80	7	75	42	50
1982	33	60	7	70	44	0
1992	73	27	0	77	25	--
2002	80	20	0	88	17	--
2008	80	20	0	92	67	--
<i>SOUTH &amp; INTERIOR WEST: HOUSE</i>						
Year	Pct Seats Blue	Pct Seats Pur	Pct Seats Red	Pct Blue Held by D	Pct Pur Held by D	Pct Red Held by D
1972	21	33	46	91	77	41
1982	19	32	49	97	79	41
1992	20	16	64	94	85	43
2002	18	9	73	97	44	26
2008	17	10	73	97	94	27
<i>SOUTH &amp; INTERIOR WEST: SENATE</i>						
Year	Pct Seats Blue	Pct Seats Pur	Pct Seats Red	Pct Blue Held by D	Pct Pur Held by D	Pct Red Held by D
1972	11	33	56	100	61	47
1982	4	44	52	100	63	25
1992	0	26	74	--	86	40
2002	0	19	81	--	40	34
2008	0	19	81	--	80	30



in 2006 and 2008 undoubtedly contributed to their poor electoral fortunes, even the similarly unfavorable partisan tides facing Democrats in 1994 and 2002 failed to wipe out the red-seat moderate Democratic bloc, suggesting that blue-seat Republicans became more vulnerable to serious challenge from Democratic opponents than red-state Democrats were from Republican rivals.

Blue-seat Democrats, on the other hand, became virtually invulnerable to defeat in general elections. Between 1996 and 2008, House Democrats successfully defended 998 of 1,001 blue seats (including both open seats and incumbents seeking another term); 94 percent of incumbents running for reelection won by 20 percentage points or more. In the Senate over the same period, 44 of 45 Democratic-held blue seats in the Senate were retained by the party, with 73 percent of victorious incumbents winning by at least 20 points. But the lack of serious electoral challenge faced by these candidates reflects the Republican Party's underlying advantage in apportionment. With any successful Republican blue-seat candidate likely to be an ideological moderate, and with no need to hold a substantial number of blue seats in order to gain control of either chamber, Republican leaders have little incentive to devote resources toward recruiting and funding strong challengers in these districts or states.

Congressional Democrats, however, cannot afford to concede red seats to the opposition. Fortunately for the party, it has managed to elect a number of additional members over the past several years in fundamentally unfavorable partisan territory, allowing it to continue to compete for control of both congressional chambers. Of the 47 House Democrats representing red districts in the 111th Congress, 35 were elected in 1996 or later, and 15 of these members defeated incumbent Republicans in order to win their seats. Nine of the 14 red-state Democratic senators were elected in 1996 or later, and five of these defeated incumbent Republicans. These efforts were assisted by the favorable national environment for the party in 2006 and 2008; many of these seats are likely to be vulnerable to challenge in future elections when fundamentals favor the Republicans, as is likely to be the case in 2010.

### **The Electoral Consequences of Party Strategy**

The analysis presented in this chapter has established that the congressional parties are far from ideological mirror images, that moderate Republicans have vanished from Congress in large part because the constituents who once elected them—residents of the Northeast and coastal West—increasingly prefer Democrats, and that the presence in office of a robust moderate wing is an electoral necessity for Democrats seeking a national majority in either chamber due to the dependable pro-Republican bias inherent in American electoral institutions. This last finding offers a potential answer to the still-unresolved question of *why* American voters have been much more likely to elect moderate Democrats than moderate Republicans to Congress in recent elections. Electoral incentives compel national Democratic leaders to place considerable emphasis on competing in Republican-leaning states and congressional districts, while Republicans are free to

concede “blue” territory to the opposition without forfeiting the chance to gain a national majority.

It is increasingly apparent that Republican and Democratic leaders have very different relationships with the centrist wings of their respective parties. Many Republicans, especially interest group leaders, activists, and less pragmatic party officials, often appear to view moderate party members as vestigial relics of another era who only serve as impediments to the pursuit of conservative goals. In typically unscripted fashion, then-House Majority Leader Dick Armey of Texas expressed this view while campaigning for conservative Republican challengers in the South during the fall of 1996. “One of the things we’ve learned is we’ve got to be strong enough to outvote our own moderates,” Armey said. “We tossed them a bone and they bit us in the leg” (Balz 1996).

Ill feeling between House Republican moderates and the party leadership occasionally erupted openly in subsequent years. In the spring of 2000, a group of moderates threatened to withhold their dues to the National Republican Congressional Committee to protest what they believed was tacit support by Armey and Majority Whip Tom DeLay of conservative primary challengers to moderate incumbents, especially Marge Roukema of New Jersey. Roukema narrowly prevailed in the 2000 Republican primary over a state assemblyman who enjoyed support from the Club for Growth, a conservative political action committee. The Club for Growth’s co-founder, Stephen Moore, described its mission as “to rankle and ruffle the feathers of the moderates. We feel like they’ve been the enemy of progress” (Bresnahan and Crabtree 2000). Though Roukema won reelection, she was passed over for the chairmanship of the House Banking Committee the following year for a more conservative colleague, despite being next in line under the seniority system, and retired from the House in 2002.

Moderate Republicans have repeatedly complained about perceived snubs by the party leadership in the selection of committee chairs and slots on desirable committees. After the 2002 election, Speaker Dennis Hastert and Majority Leader Tom DeLay announced that Appropriations subcommittee chairs, popularly known as the “cardinals,” would be selected by the leadership-controlled Republican Steering Committee. Hastert and DeLay were seen as responding to complaints by conservatives that the Appropriations Committee was too free-spending and ideologically moderate (Firestone 2002). As *The Hill* reported in early 2003:

Last week, for the first time in recent memory, House leaders called on the 13 chairmen of the Appropriations subcommittees to justify their continued reign as so-called cardinals. They also emphasized the importance of hewing to the party line and playing a more active role in fundraising.

Requiring testimonial from the appropriators was meant to send a message to Reps. Ralph Regula (Ohio) and Jim Walsh (N.Y.), two moderates on the panel, according to an aide to one of the 13 subcommittee chairmen.

It has also become apparent that House leaders have followed through on threats made last year in the midst of a heated battle on campaign finance reform.

Members of the GOP leadership withheld plum committee assignments from Republican lawmakers who defied them and signed a discharge petition forcing a vote on the controversial bill.

Three members looking to move to better committees and who signed the petition were passed over.

Rep. Rob Simmons (Conn.) missed out on his bid for the Appropriations Committee and Rep. Todd Platts (Pa.) was turned down for a spot on the Armed Services Committee. Rep. Charlie Bass (N.H.) failed to land a spot on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee (Bolton 2003).

Jim Saxton of New Jersey, though next in line in seniority, was also deprived of the chairmanship of the House Resources Committee in what was widely seen as an ideologically-based decision by the Steering Committee, which passed over Saxton and six other Republicans to choose strong conservative Rep. Richard Pombo of California for the top spot on the panel. Moderate Wayne Gilchrest of Maryland, among those turned down for the position, expressed his unhappiness: "If you bypass the seniority system for political purposes, you've disrupted the orderly operations of the House" (*Sacramento Bee* 2003). Similarly, Christopher Shays of Connecticut, the senior Republican on the Government Reform Committee, was denied the committee chairmanship in large part for his role in enacting campaign finance reform (VandeHei and Eilperin 2003). Mike Castle of Delaware, a key moderate leader, told *Roll Call*, "I have a continuing and abiding concern that moderates are uncomfortable in the Conference and that becoming chairs of committees has come down to a litmus test on voting. I don't think that's conducive to the Conference as a whole" (Crabtree 2003). The revelation that a PAC controlled by Majority Leader DeLay had donated \$50,000 to the Club for Growth during the 2002 campaign contributed further to the moderates' sense of being unwelcome in their own party.

Even for popular, long-serving moderate Republican incumbents, primary challenges from the right are not threats to be taken lightly; as the national Republican Party has become more closely associated with strong conservatism, the party's primary electorate has become dominated by right-leaning voters even in places where most participants in the general election are moderate or even liberal. Several moderate incumbents in both houses have recently faced serious rivals for the Republican nomination funded by party-aligned interest groups; two sitting Republican House members—including the aforementioned Wayne Gilchrest, a nine-term incumbent—lost renomination bids in 2006 and 2008, while Arlen Specter's defection to the Democratic Party in April 2009 was motivated by (quite reasonable) fears of a similar defeat in the 2010 Pennsylvania Republican primary. Such challenges are not always textbook examples of sound electoral strategy; Lincoln Chafee nearly lost to a conservative challenger in the Republican primary in 2006 despite a general consensus among political strategists that the party would have had no chance of retaining the seat had he been defeated, while both of the seats formerly occupied by the House Republicans who were upset in primaries during the past two election cycles were subsequently captured by Democrats.

Even when Republican party leaders are not intentionally targeting moderate members, their aggressive governing style and pursuit of a strong conservative agenda can

still cause significant political difficulties for incumbents representing marginal seats. In the wake of the 1994 election and subsequent “Republican Revolution,” new House Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia became, for a time, the most prominent congressional leader in recent memory. While Gingrich welcomed the publicity, holding daily televised press briefings for the first several months of his speakership, his high profile soon became a liability to the party in parts of the nation where his brand of fiery conservatism was relatively unpopular. Democratic challengers seized on opportunities to tie vulnerable moderate Republicans to the controversial Speaker. Two-term moderate Republican Peter Blute of Massachusetts faced an ad campaign from Democratic opponent Jim McGovern that asked voters, “If you wouldn’t vote for Newt, why would you vote for Blute?”<sup>5</sup> In the summer of 1996, Jim Longley of Maine began to vote regularly against the routine approval of the previous day’s journal on the floor of the House, inviting speculation that he was attempting to lower the percentage of his votes cast in agreement with Gingrich (Gugliotta 1996). Both men lost their bids for reelection.

Moderate Republicans may also have been the victims of their own strategic decision on most issues to adopt a middle-ground position between party conservatives on one side and Democrats on the other. They have often succeeded at winning modest policy concessions on legislation, but usually shy away from public confrontation with the conservative wing of their party. And almost never during the twelve years of Republican rule from 1994 to 2006 did Republican moderates join with minority Democrats to defeat the leadership on the floor of the House, though they theoretically held the balance of power in the chamber for the whole period. The impeachment of Bill Clinton in 1998 provides a revealing example of moderate Republicans’ split-the-difference approach. Under great pressure from DeLay and the party leadership to support impeachment, most moderate Republicans voted in favor of at least two of the proposed articles. Four prominent moderates immediately sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, released publicly, stating that “we are not convinced, and do not want our votes interpreted to mean, that we view removal from office as the only reasonable conclusion of this case,” an act that struck some observers as trying to have the issue both ways (Chen 1998). By simultaneously attempting to demonstrate sufficient loyalty to prevent retribution by party leadership and enough independence to retain political support back home, moderate Republicans may have ended up satisfying nobody.

Republican moderates also have failed to establish a strong organizational presence within the House, a Republican version of the moderate Democrats’ Blue Dog Coalition. While moderate Republican caucuses do exist, most notably the Tuesday Group, they appear to act with less coordination than the Blue Dogs and have little visibility outside the House. Though many individual moderates have remained personally popular within their home districts, they have become increasingly unable to make the case to their constituents that they have served as effective brakes on the conservative Republican leadership—or, between 2000 and 2008, George W. Bush. At a 2002 debate between incumbent Connie Morella of Maryland, the most liberal Republican in the House at the time, and Democratic

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<sup>5</sup> This example courtesy of colleague Darshan J. Goux, who coined it for the McGovern campaign.

challenger Chris Van Hollen, an informal poll of the audience revealed that 85 percent viewed Morella favorably but 60 percent planned to vote for Van Hollen, presumably in order to register a protest against Morella's more conservative party leadership (Dionne 2002). Van Hollen ultimately defeated Morella by four percentage points. Similarly, Lincoln Chafee lost his bid for a second full term in the U.S. Senate in 2006 despite holding a job approval rating of 63 percent, presumably because Rhode Island voters, though satisfied with Chafee's personal performance in office, preferred Democratic control of the Senate (CNN 2006).

The comparative lack of organizational strength and tactical savvy displayed by moderate Republicans in Congress has contributed to the faction's decline in the years since the 1994 Republican Revolution.<sup>6</sup> But moderate Republicans would have much more potential leverage within their party if the leadership saw their political survival as critical to its ability to hold power. Instead, the promise of maintaining a majority built on the election of conservatives from solidly Republican red districts, made conceivable only by the pro-Republican bias inherent in congressional elections, has proved more attractive than the compromises necessary to protect centrist incumbents representing Democratic-leaning seats.

Democratic leaders have been more solicitous of their party's moderate officeholders. In the House, moderates Ike Skelton of Missouri (Armed Services), Charlie Stenholm of Texas and Collin Peterson of Minnesota (Agriculture), Ralph Hall of Texas and Bart Gordon of Tennessee (Science), and John Spratt of South Carolina (Budget) have all served as committee chairs or ranking members in recent Congresses. Gene Taylor of Mississippi even retained his ranking membership on an Armed Services subcommittee despite refusing to vote for Democratic leaders for speaker in 1995, 2001, 2003, and 2005. While both parties have continued to respect seniority when assigning chairmanships in the Senate, only among Republicans has there been recent uncertainty that the most senior eligible majority party member would assume the leadership of a committee: Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania faced opposition from conservative activists when seeking the chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee following the 2004 election, though he was ultimately granted the gavel by his colleagues (Earle 2004).

In addition, Democratic leaders have been more aggressive than Republicans at recruiting centrist challengers to contest districts that lean toward the other party. In 2006, then-Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee chair Rahm Emanuel placed particular emphasis on encouraging moderate candidates to challenge incumbent Republicans as part of an ambitious and ultimately successful attempt to regain control of the House. Emanuel even bragged to the press about particular candidates' pro-life or anti-gun control credentials in order to argue that such positions made them more formidable electoral opponents (Bendavid 2007). Centrist Democratic incumbents also tend, in most cases, to be free from the threat of primary challenges backed by national party donors or allied interest groups, at least if conventional political wisdom holds that the party would

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<sup>6</sup> Rae (1989) argues that similar problems bedeviled moderate Republicans between the 1960s and 1980s, as they were increasingly outworked, out-organized, and out-strategized by conservatives in the party.

likely lose the seat in the general election if it nominated a more liberal candidate. The most prominent exception over the past decade, the 2006 primary defeat of Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, was justified on the grounds that the seat was safely Democratic regardless of the outcome of the primary. (Lieberman was ultimately reelected anyway as an independent and chose to remain affiliated with the Democratic caucus in the Senate.)

Of course, some of these variations in behavior between the parties during the 1994-2006 period may represent the difference between the arrogance of the majority and the desperation of the minority. Yet it seems likely that the distinct strategic positions inhabited by the two parties account for their contrasting treatment of centrist members. For example, Emanuel defended his recruitment of moderate House candidates in red districts to party activists in 2006 by noting that there weren't enough Democratic-leaning seats held by Republicans to construct a potential majority solely by backing liberals. Even after losing control of Congress in 2006, Republican leaders responded not by "moving to the center" in order to recapture seats lost by moderate incumbents, but instead by redoubling their commitment to ideological conservatism and opposition to the Obama administration's legislative agenda, with an objective of winning sufficient numbers of red and purple seats in the 2010 election to regain control of the House without the need to make ideological compromises.

Finally, it is likely that the actions and tactics of moderate party members themselves have played a role in their diverging electoral fortunes. There are many historical examples of centrist Democrats differing with the leadership of their party on prominent issues, from the "Boll Weevil" support for Ronald Reagan's budget in 1981 to the 1993 Clinton deficit reduction plan, passed by just one vote in both houses of Congress despite the large nominal Democratic majorities in place at the time. The rise of the Blue Dog Coalition in the House as a highly visible alternative voice to liberal party leaders on policy matters reflects the need for many members from Republican-leaning constituencies to brand themselves publicly as a "different kind of Democrat."

Founded after the losses of 1994, the Blue Dog Coalition was originally intended as an explicit rival to the comparatively liberal Democratic leadership, reflecting the perception by southern moderates that their views were not being adequately represented within the party (Kahn 1995); its name supposedly refers to "yellow-dog [i.e. loyal] Democrats choked blue by the leadership." While the group itself is nominally dedicated to fiscal conservatism and deficit reduction, Blue Dogs tend to take moderate-to-conservative positions on most issues, especially social issues, reflecting the red-district constituencies of most of the group's members.

While the ranks of moderate Republicans have continued to dwindle, the Blue Dogs have grown significantly in numbers. Founded as a group of 21 in early 1995, by 2009 the Blue Dog Coalition had increased to 52 members, or 20 percent of the House Democratic caucus. The organization's members overlap heavily with the Democrats categorized as moderates in the analyses presented earlier in this chapter, and most represent "red" or Republican-leaning districts.

Blue Dogs are not shy about proclaiming their independence—even from a House Speaker of their own party. "When we agree with [Nancy Pelosi], we help her," said Blue Dog member Allen Boyd of Florida in 2008. "When we disagree with her, she knows that

we will stand up to her and disagree with her” (Lueck 2008). While Pelosi may not appreciate such a lack of deference, the behavior of the Blue Dogs reflects the perceived need for Democrats from red seats to establish a political identity distinct from the national party. (Several Blue Dogs have been the targets of Republican advertising attempting to tie them to the Speaker’s “San Francisco values.”) Over the past several years, the coalition has stepped up efforts to create a “Blue Dog brand” in the minds of voters, endorsing challengers who subscribe to the group’s views on fiscal matters and sending members to campaign for candidates in districts where national party figures—such as Pelosi—might be electoral liabilities.<sup>7</sup>

While no formal counterpart to the Blue Dog Coalition exists in the more individualistic Senate, a number of moderate Democrats in the upper chamber similarly stake out highly public positions to the right of party leaders and other liberals, often receiving copious attention from the news media for doing so. Regardless of their personal beliefs or philosophies, there are powerful electoral incentives for Democratic senators elected from Republican-leaning states to engage in this behavior; examples from the 2009-2010 Congress include Ben Nelson of Nebraska, Max Baucus of Montana, Tim Johnson of South Dakota, Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, and Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor of Arkansas. While liberal colleagues and party activists may view these senators’ ideological independence with considerable frustration, the fate of former Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota provides an important warning about the perils of party loyalty. Daschle, whose role as party leader in the Senate required him to be a leading critic of George W. Bush and congressional Republicans, lost his bid for a fourth term in 2004 after his red-state constituents decided that he no longer adequately represented their political views.

For congressional Democrats, then, ideological disunity represents the price of majority status. Republicans, due to the quirks of American electoral institutions, do not perceive a similar constraint. The congressional party’s increasingly unified ideological commitments allow it to govern effectively while in the majority, with the 1994-2006 period of GOP rule under the leadership of Gingrich, Hastert, and DeLay in the House, and Dole, Lott, and Frist in the Senate, characterized by ruthless use of agenda control powers, reliance on the discipline provided by allied interest groups, and, in the House, the regular use of ideological litmus tests for the distribution of committee chairmanships and other desirable positions. Dissenting party members were treated as troublemakers to be marginalized rather than valuable components of the governing coalition.

Yet the decline of the moderate wing of the GOP has considerably restricted the constituencies in which the party can compete effectively. Much of the Northeast and coastal West, as well as an increasing number of urban and suburban locales elsewhere in the nation, have become substantially less friendly to the party over the past two decades. Moreover, as the share of moderate Republicans declines steadily over time, the party’s association with strong southern-style conservatism only continues to increase, further

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<sup>7</sup> For example, several incumbent Blue Dog Coalition members campaigned actively for Democratic candidates Don Cazayoux of Louisiana and Travis Childers of Mississippi, who successfully captured heavily Republican districts in spring 2008 special elections.

complicating potential attempts to increase the geographic scope of its electoral base. While congressional Republicans enjoy a significant natural advantage in congressional elections, it is difficult for the party to achieve more than a narrow majority without greatly improving its recent fortunes in blue states and districts.

It is hard to envision the circumstances under which a resurgent moderate Republican wing returns to office in significant numbers. Ironically, moderate Republicans might have had the chance to play a more constructive role in shaping legislation during an Obama administration that initially signaled eagerness for bipartisan support. By the time of Obama's election, however, few moderate Republicans remained in office to take advantage of this opportunity. Even if Republicans gain seats in the 2010 congressional elections—a likely development, historically speaking—the party's most appealing electoral targets remain the 48 Democrats in the House and 13 Democratic senators who represent districts and states won by John McCain in 2008, where a victorious Republican challenger would almost certainly be a loyal conservative. Under these circumstances, party leaders are free to view a collective shift to the center as unnecessary to regain power. In fact, drawing sharp policy differences with the opposition Democrats can be justified as a rational strategy to the extent that it forces red-seat electorates to take ideological sides, presumably with Republican challengers against Democratic incumbents.

Congressional Democrats are much less likely than Republicans to court the political danger of ruling in a strongly ideological manner, given the necessary presence of a pivotal bloc of moderate members within any House or Senate majority. The party's success at competing in a substantial number of Republican-leaning districts allows it to achieve large nominal margins of control in both chambers in politically favorable times such as 2006 and 2008. However, the chronic disunity that stems from this unavoidable diversity at the constituency level presents its own serious strategic vulnerability for congressional Democrats, who risk an inability to govern effectively, especially in the face of unified Republican opposition. Chapter 5 explores this dilemma further in the case of the 2009-2010 effort to reform health insurance in the United States.



## Chapter 5 Conclusion

Scholars, journalists, commentators, and even politicians themselves increasingly agree that the American parties in government in the early years of the 21st century are more ideologically polarized than at any time in living memory. For those who lament the partisan atmosphere in contemporary Washington, this observation is often accompanied by nostalgia for the philosophically divided congressional parties of the previous two generations, when enacted legislation was more commonly a product of bipartisan agreement within congressional committees and rarely muscled through by leadership on party-line votes. While increased ideological sorting, conflict extension, and the resulting red-blue divide in federal elections since the 1970s substantiates the view that strong partisanship in government is, at least in large part, a product of trends among the mass public, observers who decry the current severe polarization of elite political actors frequently cite opinion surveys indicating that most Americans dislike partisan warfare and prefer compromise to conflict in government, suggesting that a significant and troubling rift has emerged between a deeply divided, ideologically motivated political class and a moderate, pragmatic electorate.

With voter sentiment nominally supportive of a bipartisan approach to governing, candidates often make at least a rhetorical commitment to easing political divisions. In his election night victory speech on November 7, 2008 in his hometown of Chicago, President-elect Barack Obama reiterated common themes of his campaign: that the “change” he promised to bring to Washington included the transcendence of entrenched partisanship, and that the success of his candidacy reflected voters’ desire for a new era of unity and cooperation:

Americans [tonight] sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and always will be, the United States of America. . . . In this country, we rise or fall as one nation, as one people. Let’s resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and pettiness and immaturity that has poisoned our politics for so long.

Let’s remember that it was a man from this state who first carried the banner of the Republican Party to the White House, a party founded on the values of self-reliance and individual liberty and national unity. Those are values that we all share. And while the Democratic Party has won a great victory tonight, we do so with a measure of humility and determination to heal the divides that have held back our progress.

The sincerity of these words might inspire skepticism in retrospect, especially after the first fifteen months of Obama’s administration produced no major successes in courting

significant Republican support for the new president's legislative initiatives. While Obama may have been honest in expressing a desire for bipartisan cooperation, and while voters would presumably have preferred legislative compromise to partisan warfare, Washington policymakers remained deeply divided along ideological lines even after the 2008 election. The president's top domestic policy priority, reform of the American health care system, narrowly passed Congress fourteen months after his inauguration over unanimous Republican opposition in both chambers. In fact, Obama's health care legislation inspired deep hostility within the GOP; House Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio delivered an emotional floor speech in which he referred to the proposal as an "Armageddon" destined to "ruin our country," while Republican leaders vowed repeal of the measure if they succeeded in taking control of Congress in the 2010 midterm elections.

Fervent, unified opposition by the out-party to a president's chief legislative initiative is hardly unexpected in an era popularly characterized by strong partisan polarization among elites and by party government in Congress. But these common generalizations about the contemporary political environment are less effective at accounting for the difficulty faced by the Obama administration and its allies in the congressional leadership in successfully shepherding health care reform through the legislative branch. The favorable 2006 and 2008 elections had provided the Democratic Party with unusually large numerical majorities in both the House and Senate, enhanced further by the party switch of Arlen Specter in April 2009 that provided the Democrats with a veto-proof advantage in the upper chamber—the first time either party had held 60 seats since 1978. Simple party-line voting in Congress would have delivered Obama a legislative victory with ease; instead, the process of enactment took over a year, was fraught with significant conflict over the provisions of the legislation among congressional Democrats and between the two chambers, nearly collapsed at several junctures, and was not assured of success until hours before the final vote in March 2010. In the meantime, public approval of the reform effort—and of Obama and congressional Democrats—had eroded substantially; by the time of final passage, most national opinion surveys measured more opposition than support among the American public.

Several other factors might have been expected to work in favor of Democratic unity in this case. First, health care reform was a signature issue for the party. Democrats enjoyed a long-standing advantage over Republicans as the party most voters preferred to handle health care. Unlike abortion or gun control, health care reform did not fundamentally divide Democrats ideologically; even relatively conservative congressional Democrats had campaigned in favor of expanding access and placing greater limits on unpopular insurance company practices such as the refusal to cover individuals with pre-existing medical conditions. Moreover, the party's failure to enact reform legislation when it last held both Congress and the presidency in 1993-1994 was widely seen in Washington as a disastrous failure of governance that had led directly to massive Republican victories in the 1994 midterm elections. Finally, the well-financed campaign of opposition from insurance companies, pharmaceutical manufacturers, doctors, and hospitals that had helped to kill Bill Clinton's universal care initiative in 1994 was in little danger of reappearing in 2009; by reducing the scope of systemic change and by including several industry-friendly provisions in their proposal, Democratic leaders had succeeded in

winning at least neutrality, and in some cases outright support, from these traditional enemies of reform.

Despite these advantages, Obama's efforts faced one unavoidable challenge: the need to win approval from Democrats representing states and districts that leaned (heavily, in some cases) to the Republican Party. Although Obama received nearly 54 percent of the two-party vote in the 2008 presidential election, only 208 House Democrats and 46 Senate Democrats represented constituencies that had supported him over John McCain—less than a majority in both chambers. While residents of red states are not significantly less supportive of health care reform in the abstract than are blue-state voters, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, the association of the specific plan before Congress in 2009-2010 with liberal Democrats such as Obama and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi represented a serious potential threat to politically vulnerable Democratic incumbents who needed crossover support from McCain voters to win reelection.

Some moderate House Democrats declared their opposition early in the process, reducing the margin of error for party leaders seeking a majority. Others were open to persuasion provided that they extracted highly visible concessions in exchange for providing their support, in order to create public distance between themselves and the liberal wing of the party. These efforts were not welcomed by regular Democrats, many of whom expressed resentment at the moderates' exploitation of their pivotal position in the chamber, yet their own attempts to gain similar leverage were not ultimately successful. More than 60 House liberals signed a pledge sponsored by the House Progressive Caucus in July 2009 to oppose any health care reform bill that lacked a "robust public option"—a generous government-run health insurance plan designed to compete with the private sector—in an effort to counter the demands of party moderates. The bill that initially passed the House in November 2009 included a more modest version of the public option, while the final legislation enacted in March 2010 lacked the provision entirely. Both bills ultimately passed with virtually unanimous support from the July 2009 pledge-makers.

While battles over the scope—and very existence—of the public option represented much of the internal debate among congressional Democrats during the summer and fall of 2009, the most prominent division within the party occurred on the issue of abortion, seriously threatening the overall fate of the reform effort. During floor debate over the original House version of health care legislation, Bart Stupak, a pro-life Blue Dog Democrat from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, introduced an amendment that strengthened provisions in the bill designed to prevent public money from funding abortion procedures covered under health insurance policies. Many liberal Democrats opposed Stupak's proposal, believing that it was intended to discourage even private insurers from providing abortion coverage. Speaker Pelosi and other Democratic leaders attempted to work out a compromise prior to the vote but were unable to do so; with Stupak and his allies threatening to oppose the unamended bill on the floor of the House, Pelosi had no choice but to allow a vote on the amendment.

Table 5.1 displays the vote on the Stupak Amendment, classifying Democratic members of the House based on the partisanship of their districts (employing the classifications introduced in Chapter 4). Blue-seat Democrats overwhelmingly opposed the amendment; all but two of the 16 votes in its favor from this group were cast by Roman

**Table 5.1**  
**Vote on Stupak Amendment, U.S. House of Representatives, November 7, 2009**

<b>Members by Party/District Type</b>	<b>Yea</b>	<b>Nay</b>
Democrats: Blue Seats	16	141
Democrats: Purple Seats	15	39
Democrats: Red Seats	33	14
Republicans	176	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>194</b>

*Source:* Clerk of the House, <<http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2009/roll884.xml>>

Catholic members, most of whom represented urban districts in the Northeast and Midwest. Democrats from purple seats were somewhat more divided, although opponents outnumbered supporters by a ratio of more than two-to-one. But 33 of 47 red-seat Democrats favored the Stupak Amendment, guaranteeing its easy passage (when combined with unanimous Republican support) over the objections of Democratic leaders.

In the Senate, the abortion issue proved not to be an equally major point of contention among Democrats. However, party leaders still struggled to maintain Democratic unity in the face of a Republican filibuster threat that required the votes of all 60 majority-party members to overcome. Finance Committee chair Max Baucus, a six-term Democrat from red-state Montana, insisted on pursuing bipartisan negotiations over health care reform within his committee during the summer and fall of 2009, despite mounting evidence that such attempts would be fruitless due to the Republican strategy of enforcing unified opposition to Obama's reform efforts. Baucus ultimately abandoned this approach only after months of delay, prompting frustration from party liberals who believed that Republicans had not been negotiating in good faith but were instead endeavoring to stall the legislation.

The most serious single threat to the fate of health care reform in the Senate, however, came from Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska. Nelson, though a Democrat, had good personal reasons to position himself as skeptical of his party's legislative agenda; Nebraskans had voted Democratic in a presidential election only once since 1936 (in the Johnson landslide of 1964) and had supported John McCain by a margin of 15 percentage points in 2008. Nelson withheld his support for health care reform over the summer and fall of 2009, winning a series of policy concessions only to set additional conditions before he would commit to backing the legislation. His final demand, additional federal aid directed to Nebraska alone to cover the rising Medicaid costs associated with the coverage expansion provisions of the bill, finally succeeded in securing his endorsement of the

**Table 5.2**  
**Vote on Affordable Care Act, U.S. House of Representatives, March 21, 2010**

<b>Members by Party/District Type</b>	<b>Yea</b>	<b>Nay</b>
Democrats: Blue Seats	152	3
Democrats: Purple Seats	48	5
Democrats: Red Seats	19	26
Republicans	0	178
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>212</b>

*Source:* Clerk of the House, <<http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2010/roll165.xml>>

Democratic leadership’s bill shortly before it reached the Senate floor in December 2009. But this transparent payoff to Nelson in the form of special treatment for his home state, dubbed the “Cornhusker Kickback” by Republicans and the press, severely embarrassed the Democratic leadership, forcing its subsequent repeal in the budget reconciliation legislation enacted in March 2010 to resolve House-Senate differences.

Though the House of Representatives had passed a preliminary version of health care reform in November 2009, and though the Senate bill that formed the basis of the compromise legislation was, in general, to the ideological right of the original House bill, final passage in March 2010 was hardly a foregone conclusion in the House. The popularity of the reform effort had decayed substantially over the year-long enactment process, as had the public approval of the president and congressional leadership. A Republican victory in a special Senate election in normally Democratic Massachusetts in January 2010 had been widely interpreted as a manifestation of public opposition to the Democratic health care bill, dubbed a “government takeover” by Republicans at a time when popular trust in government was at a low ebb due to a poor national economy. Pelosi nonetheless scheduled a floor vote on the legislation in March and set to work rounding up votes from Democrats who had supported the previous version but were wavering in the face of an increasingly unfavorable political environment.

Table 5.2 displays the result of the final House vote. While 200 of the 208 House Democrats elected from blue or purple districts supported the bill, its fate was in doubt until hours before voting began due to the sizable bloc of pivotal red-seat Democrats in the chamber whose support for the measure might well endanger their chances of reelection. A majority of these members ultimately opposed the bill, although a sufficient number were persuaded to back it in order to allow for narrow passage on the floor in the face of unanimous Republican opposition.

Had House and Senate Republicans pursued a strategy of cooperation with Obama over health care reform, it is quite possible that they could have won significant compromises on policy in exchange for their support. As *Time* reported in May 2009:

When Barack Obama informed congressional Republicans last month that he would support [the use of the budget reconciliation process to enact health care reform], they were furious. . . . Where, they demanded, was the bipartisanship the President had promised? So . . . the President put a proposal on the table, according to two people who were present. Obama said he was willing to curb malpractice awards, a move long sought by Republicans that is certain to bring strong opposition from the trial lawyers who fund the Democratic Party.

What, he wanted to know, did the Republicans have to offer in return?

Nothing, it turned out. Republicans were unprepared to make any concessions, if they had any to make (Tumulty 2009).

Both Obama's gestures of bipartisanship and the Republicans' choice of an oppositional strategy during 2009-2010 resulted from widespread skepticism on both sides that the congressional Democratic Party could enact health care reform on its own. It is undoubtedly true that House and Senate Republicans faced enormous pressure from party activists to oppose "Obamacare" regardless of its chances of success. Yet this approach was further validated by the multiple historical cases of health care reform efforts crumbling in the face of Democratic disunity, most notably in 1993-1994. Obama, who signaled flexibility in the specifics of reform, presumably would have welcomed the formation of a bipartisan coalition that would have guaranteed easy passage in Congress, even if the scope of the resulting legislation was more modest than he had proposed during the 2008 campaign. Yet Republicans declined to negotiate on the issue, believing that unified opposition from their members would expose the divisions within the congressional Democratic Party and ultimately doom the legislation, thus wounding Obama politically. "If we're able to stop Obama on this, it will be his Waterloo," argued Republican Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina. "It will break him" (Smith 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Although Obama's health care reform proposal was ultimately enacted without any substantive concessions to, or support from, congressional Republicans, the legislation's narrow margins of passage and multiple near-death experiences seem at odds with characterizations of contemporary congressional politics as thoroughly dominated by unified, polarized parties and all-powerful party leaders. Over time, the parties have indeed polarized, while party leaders have gained substantial influence. Yet these trends have not proceeded equally on both sides. The need for Democrats to compete in Republican-leaning

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<sup>1</sup> Conservative commitment to this strategy was sufficiently strong that former George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum lost his position at the American Enterprise Institute after criticizing Republican refusal to compromise with Obama on health-care reform. Frum made his comments after Democrats had succeeded in enacting health care over Republican opposition. See Frum (2010) and Kurtz (2010).

constituencies renders the party's agenda uncertain of passage even when margins of control are unusually large, as occurred in 2009-2010.

The 2010 midterm elections will likely result in significant numerical gains for congressional Republicans and perhaps a return to majority status for the party. While the current Democratic margins in both houses are superficially wide by recent standards, they are in fact quite electorally precarious. Notably, Republicans could regain control of the House simply by sweeping the 48 Democratic-held seats in which John McCain outpolled Barack Obama in 2008. Such an outcome, even if it reflected economic fundamentals more than the parties' ideological positioning, would seemingly vindicate the Republican strategy of unified opposition to Democratic rule while sending the message to Democrats that they had moved too far to the left during the first two years of the Obama administration. Even if Democrats retain control of Congress, their smaller margins of control will further frustrate party leaders' attempts to govern effectively in the face of internal division and Republican unity.

The electoral fortunes of both parties have waxed and waned over the past four decades in both presidential and congressional elections. Yet the underlying trends of elevated partisan strength in the electorate, ongoing ideological sorting among party identifiers, and increasing salience of social and cultural issues have remained remarkably consistent. These phenomena have greatly affected the ways in which individual votes aggregate into electoral outcomes within congressional districts and states, which in turn have influenced the identity and behavior of elected officials in both the executive and legislative branches.

It is always tempting, but often mistaken, to extrapolate current patterns indefinitely into the future. Yet the mutually reinforcing emergence of partisan polarization at both the elite and mass levels since the 1970s shows little sign of reversing, though it may begin to reach an effective maximum. As the Republican Party moves farther to the ideological right under the influence of its dominant southern conservative wing, its electoral fortunes are unlikely to rebound significantly in the coastal blue regions populated by socially liberal voters. Similarly, the faction of socially conservative Democrats able to compete in red territory might decline further in size over time as the party becomes more strongly identified with northern cultural liberalism.

History suggests that such trends usually come to an end upon the rise of an issue or event that cuts across existing coalitions, rearranging the party system in the process: slavery in the 1850s, the Great Depression in the 1930s. Thus the possibility exists that our current age of partisanship and polarization will be succeeded by a very different era. In the immediate future, however, there is little reason to expect the electoral map of 2012 or 2016 or 2020 to deviate substantially from those of 2000, 2004, and 2008. And so the partisan conflict that defines the elite politics of today will continue to be reflected in the geographic polarization of the American people.

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