Acute partisan conflict arising from the ideological polarization of the national parties is now a dominant feature of American politics. The series of prominent showdowns over fiscal policy between Democratic president Barack Obama and the congressional Republicans that have followed the Republican takeover of the House in 2011 represent the tip of the iceberg. Partisan disputes over matters large and small, personnel as well as policy, occur almost daily. Polarized parties, combined with divided government, have made legislative gridlock the normal state of affairs in Washington, overcome only when dire necessity compels short-term compromises to stave off such disasters as default on the national debt or a government shutdown.

Conflict and gridlock have damaged the public standing of everyone involved, for most Americans detest the partisan posturing, bickering, and stalemate that leave disputes unresolved and major problems unaddressed.1 Congress’s popular ratings have reached all time lows, with an average of 80 percent of respondents disapproving of its performance in polls taken over the past two years; fewer than half of Americans approve of even their own party’s members and leaders.2 Barack Obama’s ratings sag every with every showdown, and he has become the most polarizing president on record.3 In polls taken since 2011, an average of more than three quarters of respondents said they were

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2 In 68 surveys taken since initial game of chicken over extending the debt ceiling in the summer of 2011, an average of 14 percent of Americans have approved of Congress, 80 percent have disapproved; in 28 surveys asking about congressional parties and leaders, 48 percent of partisans approved of their own side, 9 percent approved of the other side; data are from http://www.pollingreport.com (accessed March 28, 2013).
3 In Gallup Polls taken in the third quarter of 2012, Obama’s approval rating among Democrats averaged 90.5 percent, among Republicans, 9.8 percent; the partisan gap of 80.7 percentage points eclipsed the previous record from the George W. Bush presidency of 76.9 points (reached in the comparable quarter of Bush’s first term).
dissatisfied with the nation’s direction; dissatisfaction reached a record 88 percent during the summer of that year when House Republicans tried to force massive spending cuts by refusing to raise the nation’s debt ceiling, thereby threatening global economic turmoil, before finally backing down. 4 “Ridiculous,” “disgusting,” and “stupid” topped the list of one-word descriptions of the goings-on collected by the July 28-31, 2011 Pew survey. 5 Such reactions have done nothing, however, to curb enthusiasm for games of chicken on the edge of the fiscal cliff.

America’s governing institutions are inherently prone to stalemate and, according to James Madison’s famous account in Federalist 10, designedly so. The bicameral legislature, presidential veto, and separate electoral bases and calendars of representatives, senators, and presidents were intended to thwart simple majority rule, and they always have. The Senate’s requirement of a supermajority of 60 votes to overcome filibusters on most types of legislation erects yet another barrier to action. Thus when the parties are deeply divided and neither enjoys full control of the levers of government, acrimonious stalemate or unsatisfactory short-term fixes to avoid pending disaster become the order of the day.

To consider what, if anything, might alter this state of affairs, it is useful to have a clear idea of how it came to be. My purpose here is to provide a variety of summary data documenting what has happened and why. The evidence, in my view, shows that elite polarization is firmly rooted in electoral politics and is therefore likely to remain until electoral configurations somehow change. To begin, I review some well-known data confirming that the current partisan and ideological polarization of the Congress is the extension of a long-term trend. I then review the electoral underpinnings of this trend, reviewing the evolution of individual and aggregate voting patterns and showing how their interaction with the electoral system has led to divided government and partisan intransigence. Finally, I consider various scenarios for electoral shifts that might reduce partisan conflict and break the stalemate.

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4 On average, 76 percent said they were “dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States” in the 24 Gallup Polls asking the question since the summer of 2011; data are from http://www.gallup.com/poll/1669/General-Mood-Country.aspx (accessed March 28, 2013).
Partisan Polarization in Congress

The systematic evidence documenting the increasing partisan polarization in Congress is familiar to all congressional scholars. Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal (joined later by Nolan McCarty) have been tracing this trend since the early 1980s through their analysis of members’ first-dimension DW-Nominate scores, which are based on all non-unanimous roll call votes taken during each Congress and serve to locate each member for each Congress on a liberal-conservative scale that ranges from -1.0 to 1.0; the higher the score, the more conservative the member. Figure 1 displays the trends in the average scores for Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate since the 93rd Congress (1973-74), when ideological divisions between the parties were

![Figure 1: Mean DW-Nominate Scores of the Congressional Parties, 93rd-112th Congresses](image)

Source: Keith T. Poole at http://voteview.com/pmedian.htm

6 For an explanation of the methodology for computing these scores and justification for their interpretation as measures of liberal–conservative ideology, see Nolan M. McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Income Redistribution and the Realignment of American Politics* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1997); and Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political History of Roll Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapters 3 and 11. The data used here are from Keith T. Poole, at http://voteview.uh.edu/dwnomin.htm (accessed March 7, 2013). Shifts over time have occasionally located members above 1.0 on this scale.
unusually narrow. Two things stand out. First, of course, is that the congressional parties have moved apart; the ideological gap has widened from .568 to .845 in the Senate, and from .527 to 1.070 in the House over this period. The gaps for both chambers the 112th Congress (2011-2012) are the widest ever observed in data going back to 1879. Second, Republicans have been responsible for most of the change (more than 80 percent for both chambers). That is, the growing ideological distance between the parties is primarily a consequence of Republicans becoming more conservative, not Democrats becoming more liberal. This is also evident from Figures 2a, 2b, 3a, and 3b, which display the distributions of the ideological locations of Democrats and Republicans in the two Congresses bracketing this period. Both comparisons show the disappearance of the moderate centrists and the increasing ideological homogeneity of the congressional parties. Figure 4, which shows the percent of non-unanimous votes cast for the president’s position on roll call votes since the 93rd Congress, also reveals growing partisan gap in both chambers in votes on the president’s legislative agenda over the past 40 years. The current partisan divisions in Washington are not peculiar to the Obama years but rather represent the latest extension of a decades-long trend.

Polarization’s Links to Electoral Politics

The congressional parties have been driven apart by a diverse array of interacting internal and external forces, but one essential factor has been the corresponding polarization of the congressional parties’ respective electoral bases, which was itself in part a reaction to polarized national politics. Two major trends have given the congressional parties increasingly divergent electoral coalitions. First, the partisan, ideological, and policy opinions of American voters have grown more internally consistent, more distinctive between parties, and more predictive of voting in national elections. Second, electoral units into which voters are sorted have become more

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Figure 3a  Ideological Positions on Roll-Call Votes, Senate, 93rd Congress (1973-74)

Figure 3b  Ideological Positions on Roll-Call Votes, Senate, 112th Congress (2011-12)
homogeneously partisan. That is, over the last several decades, changes in the preferences, behavior, and distribution of congressional voters have given the congressional parties more internally homogenous, divergent and polarized electoral bases.

The main source of this electoral transformation was the partisan realignment of the South. The civil rights revolution, and particularly the Voting Rights Act of 1965,
brought southern blacks into southern electorates as Democrats, while moving conservative whites to abandon their ancestral allegiance to the Democratic party in favor of the ideologically and racially more compatible Republicans. In-migration also contributed to an increasingly Republican electorate, which gradually replaced conservative Democrats with conservative Republicans in southern House and Senate seats. Conservatives whites outside the South also moved toward the Republican Party, while liberals become overwhelmingly Democratic. The level of consistency between party identification and ideology thus grew across the board. According to American National Election Study data, in 1972, self-identified liberals and conservatives identified with the “appropriate” party 71 percent of the time; in 2008, they did so 88 percent of the time. In the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), that figure exceeded 90 percent.\footnote{The Common Content of the 2012 CCES includes 55,400 respondents, 36,097 of whom reported voting for a major party House candidate, and 27,508 of whom reported voting for a major-party Senate candidate. CCES results reported in this paper are based on these respondents; Stephen Ansolabehere, COOPERATIVE CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION STUDY, 2012: COMMON CONTENT. [Computer File] Release 1: March 13, 2013. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University [producer] http://cces.gov.harvard.edu.}

Party loyalty among congressional voters also increased over this period,\footnote{Jacobson, Politics of Congressional Elections, 128.} so the relationship between ideology and voting became much stronger. Figure 5 displays the growing proportion of self-identified liberals and diminishing proportion of self-identified conservatives voting for Democratic candidates for House and Senate in elections since 1972. The shift among conservatives is particularly notable. In 2012, according to the national exit polls, 86 percent of self-identified liberals voted for Democrats in the House elections, while nearly 84 percent of conservatives voted for Republicans\footnote{The exit poll results are from http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2012-exit-poll, November 18, 2012.}; in the CCES, the respective figures were 91 percent and 84 percent.

As a consequence of these trends, the ideological leanings of the parties’ respective electoral constituencies—defined as those voters who reported voting for the winning Republican and Democratic House and Senate candidates—have become

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increasingly divergent (Figure 6). In the 1970s, average ideological differences between the parties’ electoral constituencies were modest, about 0.5 points on the National Election Studies’ 7-point liberal-conservative scale.\(^{15}\) By 2008, the ideological gap had more than tripled in both chambers.\(^ {16}\) NES data are not yet available for 2012, but the CCES results for that year suggest that the parties’ respective electoral constituencies have continued to diverge.

The growing divergence of the congressional parties’ electoral bases is even more striking in the aggregate voting data. The presidential vote in a state or district offers a serviceable measure of its relative political leanings.\(^ {17}\) Figure 7 displays the average

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\(^{15}\) The scale points are: extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, middle-of-the-road, slightly conservative, conservative, and extremely conservative.

\(^{16}\) Realignment in the South explains only part of this change, since the gap between Republican and Democratic constituencies outside the South also grew (from 0.7 to 1.6 points in the House, from 0.6 to 1.4 in the Senate).

\(^{17}\) Relative, because the large differences between election years produced by the ups and downs of party fortunes in presidential elections have to be factored out of the measurement.
difference in the share of the major-party presidential vote between districts won by House Democrats and Republicans in elections since 1972 (the midterm data are from the presidential election two years prior). Back in the early 1970s, House districts won by Democrats and Republicans differed in their average presidential vote by only about 7 percentage points, which was a low point for the post-war period. Since then, the gap has more tripled, with most of the increase occurring since 1992. In 2012, Obama’s share of the vote in districts won by Democrats was on average 26 percentage points higher than in districts won by Republicans (66 percent, compared to 40 percent). A similar though less pronounced trend appears in comparable Senate data (Figure 8); the divergence is smaller because states tend to be more heterogeneous, politically and otherwise, than House districts. But in both chambers, the congressional party coalitions now represent constituencies that are far more dissimilar, in terms of their partisan composition, than they did in the 1970s.
Figure 7  Difference in the Democratic Presidential Vote between Districts Won by Democratic and Republican Representatives, 1972-2012

Source: Compiled by author.

Figure 8  Difference in the Democratic Presidential Vote between States Won by Democratic and Republican Senators, 1972-2012

Source: Compiled by author.
Figures 9a and 9b offers an additional perspective on this development that echoes the patterns depicted in Figures 2a and 2b. Figure 9a displays the distribution of the 1972 presidential vote (normalized as a deviation from the major-party vote for the Democrat) in the House districts won by Democrats and Republicans in that election. Figure 9b does the same for the districts won by each party’s candidates in 2012. After 1972, each party’s delegation represented a set of districts that were largely similar in their political leanings, although some Democrats did represent lopsidedly Democratic (largely urban and minority) districts. The Republicans and Democrats elected in 2012 represent much more politically dissimilar sets of districts. After 1972, 37 percent of House members represented districts where their party’s presidential candidate’s vote was below its national average; after 2012, only 6 percent did so. Comparable data from the Senate elections (not shown) reveal the same pattern of change toward more polarized electorates.
One important consequence of these trends is that member of Congress share few voters with a president of the opposite party, giving them very little electoral incentive to cooperate with the president. The decline in shared electoral constituencies since 1972 is documented in figures 10 and 11. According to the CCES, among the House Republicans electoral constituents—again, those respondents who said they had voted for a winning Republican—only 11.5 percent reported also voting for Obama. The comparable figure for Senate Republican voters was only 8.7 percent. By comparison, in the 1970s, a average of more than a third of the electoral constituents of House and Senate members of the non-presidential party consisted of people who had voted for the president. In contrast, the overlap between the electoral constituencies of the president and his partisans in Congress now exceeds 90 percent. Party differences in electoral bases are strongly related to party differences in presidential support and roll call voting patterns, so these trends have contributed directly to the growth in polarization.

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Figure 10 Shared Electoral Constituencies, U.S. Representative and President, 1972-2012

Source: 1972-2008, NES; 2012, CCES.

Figure 11 Shared Electoral Constituencies, U.S. Senator and President, 1972-2012

Source: 1972-2008, NES; 2012, CCES.
The decline in shared constituencies between presidents and opposite-party members of Congress reflects an increase in party loyalty and falloff in ticket-splitting among voters since the 1970s. Defection rates reported in the NES studies for House elections peaked at 24 percent in the 1980 and for Senate elections at 22 percent the 1972.\(^{20}\) By 2008, the defection rate had declined to 13 percent in House elections, 12 percent in Senate elections. In 2012, party-line voting was even more prevalent, reaching its highest level ever for House and Senate elections the national exit polls and the CCES and, I would venture to guess, in the NES when it becomes available. Defection rates in these surveys were below 8 percent for all federal offices in 2012, a very low proportion by historical comparison.\(^{21}\)

These surveys also reported the lowest incidence of ticket splitting—voting for a Democrat for president and a Republican for U.S. representative or Senator or vice versa—in decades. In the 1970s, a quarter of the House and Senate electorates reported voting a split ticket; in the 2000s, the average incidence of ticket splitting was down to 16 percent in House elections, 13 percent in the Senate elections. These rates were lower still in 2012. Only 6.5 percent of the House voters interviewed for the exit poll split their tickets; the previous low for an exit poll was 10.0 percent (in both 2004 and 2008); the 1976-2008 average was 14.6 percent. Reported ticket splitting was a bit higher in the CCES, 8.5 percent, but still lower than in the 2008 CCES (11.1 percent) and much lower than in any of the National Election Studies from 1952 though 2008.\(^{22}\) The rate of ticket splitting among Senate voters in the CCES was only 7.7 percent, compared with 8.6 in the 2008 CCES and 12.5 in the 2008 NES.\(^{23}\)

Reflecting these individual-level changes, the proportion of House districts delivering split verdicts—preferring the president of one party, the House candidate of

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\(^{20}\) Defections here defined as self-identified partisans, including partisan leaners, voting for candidates of the other party.

\(^{21}\) About 93 percent of partisans reporting a vote for their party’s House candidate in the exit poll, matching their loyalty in the presidential election, also 93 percent; in the CCES, 93.2 percent of partisans voted for their party’s House candidate, 92.3 percent for their party’s Senate candidate, and 94.5 percent for their party’s presidential nominee.

\(^{22}\) Jacobson, *Politics of Congressional Elections*, 173; I expect the 2012 NES survey to report similar findings.

\(^{23}\) These are national figures; the average rate of ticket splitting per state was 8.1 percent in the 2012 CCES.
Figure 12 Districts with Split Results in Presidential and House Elections, 1972-2012


Figure 13 States with Split Results in Senate and Presidential Elections, 1972-2012

Percentage of states in which a different party won Senate and presidential majorities in the election

Percentage of all 100 senators who represented states lost by their party's presidential candidate after the election
the other—has fallen dramatically since the 1970s (Figure 12), reaching an low of merely 6 percent in 2012. The same trend occurred in Senate elections (Figure 13), although split outcomes remain considerably more common in statewide elections because states tend to have greater political heterogeneity and a more even partisan balance than congressional districts. In 2012, only 6 states delivered split verdicts, and after the election, only 21 senators represented states lost by their presidential candidate, both lows for the period covered.

Sources of Divided Government

In sum, there is ample evidence that the constituencies represented by the congressional parties have grown increasingly divergent in their political coloration and are now much further apart than they were prior to the 1990s. Moreover, current voting patterns give very few member of the rival party any electoral incentive to support the president; rather, the opposite. This leaves periods of divided government especially prone to conflict and stalemate, and a quirk in the electoral system now makes divided government much more likely, for it delivers House Republican majorities even when Democrats are ascendant nationally.

Republicans enjoy a major structural advantage in House elections because the party’s regular voters are distributed more efficiently across House districts than are regular Democratic voters. Although Republican gerrymanders reinforced this advantage in through redistricting after the 2000 and 2010 censuses, it is nothing new, for its roots are demographic. Democrats win a disproportionate share of minority, single, young, secular, and gay voters who are concentrated in urban districts that deliver lopsided Democratic majorities. Republican voters are spread more evenly across suburbs, smaller cities, and rural areas, so that fewer Republican votes are “wasted” in highly skewed districts. Figure 14 illustrates the consequences. During the past four decades, a substantially larger proportion of House seats have leaned Republican than have leaned Democratic (“leaning” estimated as having the district vote for their party’s presidential candidate at least 2 points above the national average for that year or, for midterms, for

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the previous presidential election). This structural advantage has grown more consequential over time with the increase in party line and straight-ticket voting among district electorates. Notice also that the proportion of closely balanced districts (delivering presidential results within 2 percentage points of the national vote) has shrunk by nearly two-thirds since the 1980s and after 2012 was down to only 6.7 percent; thus very few representatives (29 to be precise) now serve districts without a clear partisan tilt.

Figure 14 District Partisan Advantage, 1972-2012

The increase in the Republicans’ structural advantage after the most recent redistricting was no accident. The Republicans’ sweeping national victory in 2010 gave them control of the redistricting process in 18 states with a total of 202 House seats, whereas Democrats controlled the process in only 6 states with a total of 47 seats. Republicans exploited this opportunity to shore up some of their marginal districts, adding Republican voters where their seats were most vulnerable and creating about 11

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25 In 12 of the remaining states, the parties shared control; 7 were redistricted by commissions, 7 were single-district states.
net additional Republican-leaning seats.\textsuperscript{26} Thus although Obama won 52.0 of the major-party vote and nearly five million more votes than Romney, Romney nonetheless outpolled Obama in 226 of the 435 House districts, while Obama ran ahead in only 209. With party line voting extraordinarily high and split verdicts rare (Democrats won only 9 districts won by Romney, Republicans won only 17 seats won by Obama), Democrats made little headway in the House despite Obama’s solid national victory. Democrats actually won a majority of major-party national vote cast for House candidates, their share rising from 46.6 percent in 2010 to 50.7 percent in 2012, but their seat share grew only from 44.4 percent to 46.2 percent.

The Republican’s (newly enhanced) structural advantage means that Democrats are likely remain a minority in the House for the rest of the decade. They would need a favorable national tide at least as powerful as the one they rode to power in 2006 and 2008 to pick up enough seats to win a majority under this configuration. Midterm elections rarely feature a national tide favoring the president’s party, and it would be completely unprecedented for Democrats to gain the 17 seats they currently need to attain a majority in 2014. Normally, the president’s party loses House seats at the midterm; in the three historic exceptions, (1934, 1998, and 2002), the most it gained was 9. It is also unusual for a party to make significant gains after holding the White House for at least two terms. Only a Republican presidential victory in 2016 followed by a disastrous early presidency would seem to give them any hope of taking over.

The Senate is no lock for either party, and the lineup for 2014 favors the Republicans. Democrats must defend 20 of the 33 seats up for election, 7 from states won by Romney; Obama took only 1 of the 13 states that will have Republican-held seats on the ballot. But the Republicans’ chances of picking up the 6 seats they would need for a majority depends on keeping their extreme-right Tea Party faction in check, at least in states that are not deep red. Flawed Tea Party candidates cost them as many as 5 seats in over the last two elections which, had they won them, would have left the Senate tied in the 113\textsuperscript{th} Congress. It may not be easy for Republican officials to avoid such nominations, because Tea Party sympathizers make up a majority of Republican primary

electorates in many states. The Tea Party faction’s views on such issues as immigration, abortion, same-sex marriage, global warming, and taxation makes them resistant to changes in the party’s message that might expand its appeal beyond its conservative base. The right’s demonstrated capacity to punish incumbent Republicans in primaries discourages departures from party orthodoxy. Unless national leaders find a way to avoid fielding candidates whose appeal is limited to the party’s most conservative voters, Republicans will continue to lose winnable Senate seats.

The Republicans’ main problem however, is at the presidential level. Explanations of Obama’s reelection have rightly focused on his ability to attract the votes of growing segments of the electorate: young people, singles (especially single women), social liberals, the non-churched, and ethnic minorities—Asian-Americans as well as Latinos and blacks. Romney’s coalition, in contrast, was overwhelmingly white, older, married, religiously observant and socially conservative, all shrinking demographic categories. The white share of the electorate, 88 percent when Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, and 83 percent when George W. Bush won in 2000, was only 72 percent in 2012 and is projected to decline to less than two-thirds in a few more elections. Unless the Republican Party broadens its appeal to young, minority, secular, and women voters, it will have a hard time competing for the presidency.

The prognosis, then, is for a continuation of divided government featuring ideologically polarized partisan conflict, because the current configuration of national politics reflects electoral realities that are unlikely to change soon. It would take a major electoral upheaval for Democrats to takeover the House. The staunch conservatives who dominate the Republican House coalition are firmly entrenched in safe districts where their intransigence is admired rather than scorned, so a general Republican shift to the center is unlikely (and any such shift would inspire primary election challenges from the right to those who took part). Political necessity may force Republican leaders to allow the party to be rolled on occasion—Speaker John Boehner has recently allowed three

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27 Of Republican voters in the CCES, 31 percent had very positive views of the Tea Party, and another 31 percent had somewhat positive views; for comparison, the respective figures for Democratic voters 1 percent and 3 percent.
bills to come to the floor which were opposed by most Republicans but passed with a majority of Democratic votes—but only when blocking the legislation would have been much worse for the party’s reputation than allowing it to go forward.\footnote{The issues were a vote on extending the Bush tax cuts but with higher taxes on the wealthiest taxpayers, federal relief funds for victims of Hurricane Sandy in the Northeast, and the Violence against Women Act. A party is “rolled” when a bill opposed by a majority of its members passes.} The reality is that a large majority of the voters responsible for electing the current House and Senate Republicans strongly oppose Barack Obama, his party, and his policies, and therefore Republicans in Congress have little incentive to compromise or cooperate with Obama or congressional Democrats on anything except under dire political necessity. Political necessity may prove decisive on a few issues—immigration reform has made some bipartisan progress because pragmatic Republican leaders see a bleak future for their party if they cannot win more support from Latino voters—but not on most of the national agenda.

The 2012 election underlined another source of partisan division: the increasingly divergent demographics of the party coalitions. In the newly-elected House, women and minorities outnumber white males in the Democratic caucus for the first time in history, while nearly 90 percent of the Republicans are white Christian men. Of the record 102 women taking seats in the House and Senate in 2013, nearly three-quarters are Democrats, as are 23 of the 28 Latinos, 40 of the 41 African Americans, all 11 Asian-Americans, all 6 openly gay or bisexual members, and 36 of 37 members who profess a religion other than Christianity. The incoming class of freshmen includes 40 new members who are female, ethnic minority, non-Christian, or gay (some in multiple of these categories); only 5 of them are Republicans (all women).\footnote{From data reported by Scott Keyes, Adam Peck, and Zack Beauchamp, “Infographic: The 113th Congress Will Be the Most Divers in History,” at http://thinkprogress.org/election/2012/11/13/1175491/113th-congress-diversity/, accessed November 26, 2012.} The 2012 elections basically reiterated the partisan status quo—Democrats picked up 6 seats in the House, 2 in the Senate—but the demographic mix of the incoming members points to a strong undercurrent of continuing and profound change in the makeup of Congress. The growing demographic differences between the party coalitions, reflected in their rival congressional delegations, can only add to ideological polarization in American national politics.
For the time being, then, the electoral connection portends continuing partisan polarization and policy gridlock, with all of the ugly consequences we have been observing for the past several years. Change could come from several directions. If the Obama administration falters, Republicans could take full control of the government after 2016, breaking the stalemate. Whether such a victory would also shrink the ideological gap between the parties is very doubtful. Any Republican presidential candidate whose positions might appeal to moderate Democrats and independents will have a very hard time winning the nomination from a Republican primary electorate dominated the tea partiers and social conservatives (extensively overlapping categories). A nominee acceptable to the party’s dominant right wing, even if victorious, would have little prospect of bridging the partisan divide and could expect all-out opposition from the remaining Democrats (mirroring the Republican strategy after 2008).

From the opposite direction, a Democratic takeover of the House would require a considerably greater shift in voting patterns than a Republican presidential victory, and it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which congressional Republicans are witless enough to botch things so extravagantly that a national tide sweeps them from power in 2014 or 2016. It is easy to imagine the Senate changing party hands, possibly more than once, over the next several elections, but unless one party wins a filibuster-proof majority of 60—a rare and unlikely occurrence—the Senate’s rules will continue to facilitate unrestrained minority obstruction. Recent efforts to amend these rules have come to naught, although it remains conceivable that the minority may someday exhaust the majority’s patience.

As I see it, the only reliable source of change would be an electorate that punishes extremism and intransigence and rewards moderation and compromise at the polls. There is no sign of this happening at present. Morris Fiorina and his colleagues have argued that most Americans are moderates who elect more extreme ideologues only because the parties offer them no alternative. Partisan warriors control campaign funding and dominate unrepresentative primary electorates, they argue, locking moderates out. To be sure, primary electorates are demonstrably more extreme, and three

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Republican senators did lose to more conservative primary challengers, supported by lavish independent campaigns mounted by ideological groups, in 2010 and 2012. But those moderates who do manage to get elected are the first to exit when national forces create headwinds; a large majority of the centrist Democrats elected to the House in 2006 and 2008—virtually all of them from balanced or Republican-leaning districts—are now gone. The fate of the moderate Blue Dog Coalition of House Democrats is indicative: resignations, retirements, and defeats reduced its membership from 57 to 27 in 2010 and further to 14 in 2012. If voters actually prefer moderate representatives, they have a peculiar way of showing it.

Still, reformers looking to induce greater moderation among legislators often focus on the electoral process, if only for lack of a better alternative. California voters were recently persuaded to adopt new redistricting and election processes that were intended to reduce polarization. Redistricting was given to an independent commission with elaborate safeguards to prevent partisan influence and gerrymandering. The commission’s map made little immediate difference; for example, the partisan gap between House districts won by Republicans and Democrats (measured as in Figure 7 by differences in the Democrat’s share of the district-level presidential vote) was 24.7 points under the old gerrymandered 2010 districts, 23.7 points under the new commission-drawn districts. The election reform puts candidates of all parties a single ballot in the primary; the top two vote-getters then compete in the general election, even if they are from the same party. The idea is motivate candidates to reach out beyond their party’s base to win the nomination; if the top two come from same party (as anticipated in some lopsided districts), they will take more moderate positions to compete for other party’s voters and independents. Evidence from the first election under the new system is not auspicious; an initial study found that “neither the Citizens Redistricting Commission nor the top-two primary has halted the continuing partisan polarization of California’s elected

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lawmakers or their drift away from the average voter in each district. If anything, polarization has increased and the quality of representation has declined.”

The authors correctly note that it may take some time for the effects of the reforms to register. But even if they do, it is unlikely that such changes can have more than a small marginal effect on the congressional parties’ electoral constituencies and thus on the behavior of legislators. Jungle primaries won’t protect members from well-financed intra-party challenges when they depart from party or ideological orthodoxy. Partisan gerrymandering is routinely blamed for congressional polarization, but its contribution has been modest. For example, the partisan gap in the average presidential vote between districts won by Republicans and Democrats in states with partisan redistricting for 2012 was wider (26.5 points) than for other states (23.4 points), but the figure for the second group was still greater than any previous gap in the 60 years data have been available. And of course increasing partisan polarization in the Senate cannot be blamed on gerrymandering. Thus for the foreseeable future, the challenge will be to make government work despite an electoral configuration that continues to promote divided government and polarized politics.

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35 Thad Kousser, Justin A. Phillips, and Boris Shor, “Reform and Representation: Assessing California’s Top-Two Primary and Redistricting Commission,” paper delivered the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 11-14, 2013.