

**All Politics is National: The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. House and Senate Elections in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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**Abstract**

One of the most important developments affecting electoral competition in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the increasing partisanship of the American electorate. However, the standard party identification scale does not adequately reflect the growing intensity of voters' partisan preferences. Using data from the American National Election Studies cumulative file, we show that since 1992 and especially since 2008, partisan identities have become increasingly associated with racial, cultural and ideological divisions in American society. As a result, growing proportions of strong, weak and leaning party identifiers have come to perceive important differences between the parties and to hold extremely negative opinions of the opposing party. This has led to sharp increases in party loyalty and straight ticket voting across all categories of party identification and to growing consistency between the results of presidential elections and the results of House and Senate elections. Increasing nationalization of congressional elections has important implications for party performance, democratic representation and governance.

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In the 21st century, the United States has entered a new age of partisanship. Sharp party divisions now characterize all of our major political institutions. In Congress, the ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans in both the House and Senate is now larger than at any time in the past century (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Bafumi and Herron 2010; Mann and Ornstein 2013; Kraushaar 2014). Party unity on roll call votes has increased dramatically in both chambers in recent years (Izadi 2014; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Theriault 2008; Sinclair 2006). Moreover, the party divide in Washington is not limited to the elected branches of government. On the Supreme Court, the justices now divide along party lines on major cases with greater frequency than at any time in recent history (Clark 2009; Bartels 2015; Stone 2014). Nor are deep party divisions confined to the federal government. In many of the states, Democrats and Republicans are even more divided along ideological lines than Democrats and Republicans in Congress (Shor and McCarty 2011).

The rise of partisanship in American politics is by no means limited to political elites. Indeed, the growing intensity of partisan conflict among political elites in recent years cannot be understood without taking into account the growing partisanship of the American electorate. In this paper we argue that one of the most important trends in American politics over the past several decades has been the rise of negative partisanship in the electorate. The rise of negative partisanship, a development not adequately captured by the traditional party identification scale, has led to a sharp increase in party loyalty in voting for elected offices at all levels, a concurrent increase in straight-ticket voting and a growing connection between the results of presidential elections and the results of House and Senate elections. To a greater extent than at any time in the post-World War II era, the outcomes of elections below the presidential level reflect the outcomes of presidential elections. As a result, the famous comment by the late Tip O'Neill that

“all politics is local” now seems rather quaint. In the 21st century United States, it increasingly appears that all politics is national.

### **The Growth of Partisan Behavior: Party Loyalty and Straight-Ticket Voting**

Recent elections in the United States have been characterized by the highest levels of party loyalty and straight-ticket voting since the American National Election Studies first began measuring party identification in 1952. In 2012, according to the ANES survey, 91 percent of party identifiers and leaners voted for their party’s presidential candidate.<sup>1</sup> That tied the record first set in 2004 and matched in 2008. The 90 percent rate of party loyalty in the 2012 House elections tied the record set in 1956 and the 89 percent rate of party loyalty in the 2012 Senate elections broke the previous record of 88 percent set in 1958. As one would expect, these high rates of party loyalty were accompanied by very high rates of straight-ticket voting. The 89 percent rate of straight-ticket voting in the presidential and House elections in 2012 broke the record of 87 percent set in 1952 and the 90 percent rate of straight-ticket voting in the presidential and Senate elections in 2012 broke the record of 89 percent set in 1960.

The extraordinarily high rates of party loyalty in the 2012 presidential, House and Senate elections represent a continuation of a long-term trend—one that has been evident since partisanship reached a low-point in the elections of the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the rise of partisan behavior has involved supporters of both major parties. This can be seen in Figure 1 which displays the trends in consistent party loyalty among Democratic and Republican identifiers, including leaning independents, between 1952 and 2012. Consistent loyalty here means voting for the candidates of your own party for President, House of Representatives and U.S. Senate.

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<sup>1</sup> All analyses of the 2012 ANES survey are based on the personal interviews only in order to facilitate comparisons with surveys done in earlier years. Results including the Internet-based component of the 2012 survey show slightly higher levels of party loyalty in voting for president, House and Senate.

[Figure 1 goes here]

The results in Figure 1 show that party loyalty among Democrats and Republicans has increased dramatically since the 1980s. Among all party identifiers including leaning independents, the 81 percent rate of consistent loyalty in 2012 was an all-time record, breaking the previous record of 79 percent set in 1960. This loyalty rate represented a very sharp increase from the 55 to 63 percent loyalty rates among all party identifiers between 1972 and 1988. For Republicans, the 79 percent rate of consistent loyalty in 2012 was somewhat lower than the loyalty rates of the 1952, 1956 and 1960 elections but substantially higher than the loyalty rates of the 1970s and 1980s. For Democrats, the 84 percent rate of consistent loyalty in 2012 was the highest ever recorded in an ANES survey, easily surpassing the 80 percent loyalty rate recorded in 2004.

It is striking that the sharp increases in party loyalty and straight-ticket voting in the electorate since the 1980s have not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the strength of party identification as measured by the traditional ANES seven-point scale. In the 2012 ANES survey, only 63 percent of voters identified with either the Democratic or Republican Party in response to the initial party identification question. That was the lowest percentage of party identifiers in the history of the American National Election Studies. In contrast, between 1952 and 1964 about 80 percent of voters readily identified with one of the two major parties. Even during the 1970s and 1980s when party loyalty in voting was at its nadir, the percentage of party identifiers never fell below 66 percent. And the ANES surveys are not the only ones that have picked up this trend. The Gallup Poll, using a slightly different question, has also reported a substantial increase in the proportion of Americans identifying themselves as independents in recent years (Jones 2014).

It appears that a large proportion of American voters today are reluctant to openly acknowledge any affiliation with a political party. This may reflect a kind of social desirability effect: because partisanship has a bad reputation in the U.S., the independent label appeals to many voters. However, a closer look at the ANES data reveals a somewhat more nuanced picture with regard to recent trends in the strength of party attachment in the American electorate. The proportion of strong party identifiers has rebounded since bottoming out at around 30 percent between 1972 and 1980. Since 1996, strong party identifiers have made up between 37 and 41 percent of the electorate, close to the proportion of strong identifiers between 1952 and 1964. At the same time, the composition of the independent category has changed somewhat since the 1970s—the ratio of leaning independents to pure independents has grown over the past four decades. In 2012, more than 80 percent of independent voters indicated that they leaned toward one of the two major parties. In contrast, during the 1970s and 1980s, only about 70 percent of independent voters expressed a party preference. As a result, while the proportion of independents has risen in recent years, the proportion of “pure independents,” those with no party preference whatsoever, has remained very small—well below 10 percent of the electorate.

Taken together, these results present a mixed picture with regard to the strength of party identification in the contemporary American electorate. When we shift our focus from partisan identification to partisan behavior, however, the evidence is very clear—partisanship is stronger today than at any time in the past fifty years. This is readily apparent from the data displayed in Figure 2 which shows the trends in consistent party loyalty among all three types of party identifiers—strong, weak and leaning independent—between 1952 and 2012. Among each

group of party identifiers there was a marked increase in party loyalty between the elections of the 1970s and 1980s and the present.

[Figure 2 goes here]

Not surprisingly, the data displayed in Figure 2 show that strong party identifiers had the highest rate of consistent party loyalty throughout the sixty years of the American National Election Studies. However, even among strong party identifiers, loyalty fell from an average of close to 90 percent between 1952 and 1960 to an average of around 75 percent during the 1970s and 1980s before rebounding back to close to 90 percent in the 2004-2012 elections. What is perhaps more impressive in these data, however, is the surge in party loyalty among weak party identifiers and leaning independents since the 1980s. During the 1970s and 1980s the rate of consistent party loyalty among these two groups was slightly below 50 percent. By 2012, however, the loyalty rate of both groups was close to 75 percent.

### **A Theory of Negative Partisanship**

The trends shown in Figure 2 demonstrate that partisan behavior has surged in the American electorate in recent elections and that this surge has cut across the traditional division of voters into strong, weak and independent-leaning party identifiers. Among all types of party identifiers, consistent party loyalty reached its highest levels in half a century in the 2008 and 2012 elections. We believe that this surge in partisan behavior reflects a fundamental change in the nature of partisan identity in the American electorate—the rise of negative partisanship.

Negative partisanship develops when the partisan identities of voters are strongly related to other salient social and political characteristics. When this happens, supporters of each party perceive supporters of the opposing party as very different from themselves in terms of their social characteristics and fundamental values. As a result, voters tend to hold very negative

opinions of the opposing party's leaders and supporters, prefer not to associate with those who support the opposing party and are less likely to consider voting for candidates from the opposing party (Pew Research Center 2014; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Greenberg 2004; Jacobson 2005; Kimball, Summary and Vorst 2015). These attitudes can be found among all types of party identifiers including independents who lean toward a party.

One of the most important factors contributing to the rise of negative partisanship in the United States in recent years has been a growing racial divide between the two major parties (Frey 2008; Tesler and Sears 2010; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Olson 2008; Frey 2015, chapter 11). Between 1992 and 2012 according to data from national exit polls, the nonwhite share of the U.S. electorate more than doubled, growing from 13 percent to 28 percent. However, the growing nonwhite share of the electorate has affected the two major parties very differently. Over the past several decades, the Democratic Party has become increasingly dependent on the votes of African-Americans, Latinos and other nonwhites while the Republican Party has continued to rely overwhelmingly on the votes of non-Hispanic whites. In 2012, according to the national exit poll, nonwhites made up 45 percent of Democratic congressional and presidential voters but only 11 percent of Republican congressional and presidential voters.

At the same time as the racial divide between the party coalitions has been expanding, the emergence of new moral and cultural issues such as abortion and gay rights has resulted in a growing religious and cultural divide in the electorate, especially among white voters. Since 1980, when the Republican Party made opposition to legalized abortion a plank in its national platform, religious white voters have been moving toward the GOP. According to ANES data, between 1980 and 2012, the proportion of observant white voters—those who reported attending religious services every week or almost every week—identifying with or leaning toward the

Republican Party increased sharply from 48 percent to 72 percent. Over the same time period, the proportion of nonobservant white voters—those who reported seldom or never attending religious services—identifying with or leaning toward the Republican Party increased only modestly, from 38 percent to 46 percent. As a result of this dramatic rise in Republican identification among the most observant white voters, religious conservatives have become a major component of the Republican electoral base while religious liberals and secular voters, a group that has been growing in size in recent years (Pew Research Center 2012; Newport 2015) have become a major component of the of the Democratic electoral base.

The growing divide between the partisan loyalties of religious and non-religious white voters has contributed to a growing partisan divide on cultural issues such as abortion. Thus, according to the ANES data, between 1980 and 2012 the proportion of Democratic voters taking a strongly pro-choice position on abortion rose from 38 percent to 61 percent while the proportion favoring a ban or stricter limits on abortion fell from 46 percent to 21 percent. Over the same time period, the proportion of Republican voters taking a strongly pro-choice position on abortion fell from 35 percent to 30 percent while the proportion favoring a ban or stricter limits on abortion rose from 42 percent to 51 percent. Moreover, this question probably understated the depth of the partisan divide on this issue in 2012. A new question on the 2012 ANES survey asked respondents to place themselves on a nine-point scale measuring agreement vs. disagreement with the statement that abortion should always be legal as a matter of choice. Sixty-four percent of Democratic voters placed themselves on the pro-choice side of this scale (1-4) and 54 percent placed themselves within one unit of the pro-choice end of the scale. In contrast, 59 percent of Republican voters placed themselves on the pro-life side of this scale (6-9) and 56 percent placed themselves within one unit of the pro-life end of the scale.

The growing cultural divide among white voters and the growing racial divide among all voters have both contributed to a widening ideological divide between Democratic and Republican voters. Nonwhites are not especially liberal on cultural issues but they are much more likely than whites to favor liberal economic policies such as a more generous social safety net and higher taxes on the wealthy (Barreto and Segura 2014, Abramowitz 2013). At the same time, the growing dependence of Democrats on the votes of African-Americans, Latinos and other nonwhites has helped to drive racially and economically conservative whites toward the Republican Party (Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2004; Shafer and Johnston 2006; Hillygus and Shields 2008; Abramowitz 2013).

According to ANES data, between 1972 and 2012 the proportion of white voters identifying with the Republican Party rose from 43 percent to 55 percent. However, this increase in Republican identification was concentrated almost entirely among self-identified conservatives. Over these 40 years, the proportion of conservative white voters identifying with the Republican Party rose from 60 percent to 92 percent while the percentage of moderate white voters identifying with the Republican Party only rose slightly from 38 percent to 42 percent and the percentage of liberal whites identifying with the Republican Party actually fell sharply from 24 percent to four percent. As a result, the correlation between ideology and party identification among white voters rose from only .29 in 1972 to .73 in 2012.

The result of the ideological realignment of white voters has been a very large increase in the ideological distance between supporters of the two parties. Republican voters are considerably more conservative than they were during the 1970s while Democratic voters are considerably more liberal than they were during the 1970s: the average location of Republican voters on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale (with respondents who did not place themselves

on the scale assigned to the middle position) went from 4.6 in 1972 to 5.2 in 2012 while the average location of white Democratic voters on the scale went from 3.8 in 1972 to 3.4 in 2012. Thus, the distance between the average Democratic voter and the average Republican voter on the liberal-conservative scale more than doubled over these 40 years.

We know that the two parties have been moving apart in their ideological orientations for several decades and so have voters who identify with the parties with Democrats moving to the left and Republicans moving to the right. As a result, each party's supporters now feel much farther from the opposing party's ideological position than in the past. We measured the relative distance of voters from their own party and from the opposing party on the seven-point liberal-conservative scale. Since this scale has a range from one to seven, the ideological proximity scale ranges from zero for voters who place a party at the same location as themselves to six for voters who place a party at the opposite end of the scale from themselves. Figure 3 displays the trend between 1972 and 2012 in the average ideological distance of voters from their own party and the opposing party. Leaning independents were included as party supporters in calculating the distance scores.

[Figure 3 goes here]

The results displayed in Figure 3 show that over this 40 year time period there was almost no change in the average perceived distance between voters and their own party. Voters generally viewed themselves as fairly close to their own party with the average distance score hovering around one unit. In contrast, over the same time period there was a sharp and fairly consistent increase in the average perceived distance between voters and the opposing party. Voters in 2012 perceived the opposing party as much more distant from their own ideological position than in 1972. This was true for both Democrats and Republicans. Among all party

identifiers and leaners, the average distance from the opposing party increased from 2.1 units to 3.4 units on a scale with a range from zero to six. This trend cut across all categories of party identification: average distance from the opposing party increased from 2.6 units to 3.8 units among strong party identifiers, from 1.8 units to 3.0 units among weak party identifiers and from 1.9 units to 3.1 units among leaning independents.

The increase of about 1.3 units in the average perceived distance between party identifiers and the opposing party over these 40 years was quite significant. Between 1972 and 2012, the proportion of party identifiers placing the opposing party within one unit of their own position on the liberal-conservative scale fell from 38 percent to 10 percent and the proportion placing the opposing party within two units of their own position fell from 65 percent to 26 percent. At the same time, the proportion of party identifiers placing the opposing party at least four units from their own position increased from 18 percent to 48 percent and the proportion placing the opposing party at least five units from their own position increased from four percent to 22 percent.

Increasing ideological distance from the opposing party has contributed to both growing recognition of important differences between the two major parties and to increasingly negative feelings toward the opposing party. According to the ANES survey, in 2012 there was a correlation of .40 between perceived ideological distance from the opposing party and recognition of important party differences and a correlation of -.47 between perceived ideological distance from the opposing party and ratings of the opposing party on the feeling thermometer scale. Among voters who placed the opposing party within one unit of themselves on the liberal-conservative scale, only 51 percent believed that there were important differences between the parties and the average rating of the opposing party on the feeling thermometer was

44 degrees. In contrast, among voters who placed the opposing party five or six units away from themselves, 97 percent believed that there were important differences between the parties and the mean rating of the opposing party on the feeling thermometer was 16 degrees.

The data displayed in Figure 4 show that the proportion of voters perceiving important differences between the two major parties has risen sharply in the past three decades. Between the 1950s and the 1970s there was little change on this question: the proportion of voters who saw important differences between the two major parties ranged between 55 and 60 percent during this period. Awareness of important party differences barely budged even in 1964 when Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater offered voters sharply contrasting positions on a wide range of policy issues. As the racial and ideological divides between the parties grew from the 1980s onward, however, voters became increasingly likely to perceive important differences between the two major parties: the proportion rose to around 70 percent between 1980 and 2000 and to over 80 percent between 2004 and 2012. Moreover, this shift occurred among across all categories of party identifiers. Between the 1950s and the 2000s, awareness of important differences rose from 67 percent to 91 percent among strong identifiers, from 50 percent to 83 percent among weak party identifiers and from 55 percent to 81 percent among leaning independents.

[Figure 4 goes here]

As predicted by the theory of negative partisanship, as the racial and ideological divides between the parties have increased, supporters of each party have come to hold increasingly negative views of the opposing party (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Jacobson 2007; Abramowitz 2015). This is clearly evident in Figure 5 which displays the trend in the mean rating by party identifiers, including leaning independents, of their own party and the

opposing party on the ANES feeling thermometer scale. This is a scale that ranges from zero degrees, the most negative rating, to 100 degrees, the most positive rating. A rating of 50 degrees on the scale is labelled neutral.

[Figure 5 goes here]

The data in Figure 5 show that party identifiers' ratings of their own party have changed very little over this time period. The average rating by voters of their own party went from 72 degrees in 1980 to 70 degrees in 2012. In contrast, ratings by voters of the opposing party have fallen sharply over this time period. The average rating by voters to the opposing party fell from 45 degrees in 1980 to 30 degrees in 2012. Moreover, this increase in negative feelings toward the opposing party cut across all party identification categories. Between 1980 and 2012 the mean rating of the opposing party on the feeling thermometer scale fell from 41 degrees to 24 degrees among strong party identifiers, from 47 degrees to 36 degrees among weak party identifiers and from 48 degrees to 35 degrees among leaning independents.

Today, far larger proportions of Democratic and Republican voters hold strongly negative views of the opposing party than in the past. In 1980, 55 percent of voters gave the opposing party a neutral or positive rating while only 27 percent gave the opposing party a rating of 30 degrees or lower. In contrast, in 2012, only 26 percent of voters gave the opposing party a neutral or positive rating while 56 percent gave the opposing party a rating of 30 degrees or lower. These increasingly negative opinions of the opposing party among all categories of party identifiers have been a major factor in the rise of party loyalty and straight ticket voting.

### **Explaining Partisan Behavior**

According to the theory of negative partisanship, perceptions of important party differences and strongly negative feelings about the opposing party have contributed to the very high levels

of party loyalty in the American electorate in recent elections. If this is the case, then we should find that these attitudes predict loyalty in voting even after controlling for strength of party identification. In order to test this hypothesis, Table 1 displays the relationship between party loyalty in the 2004-2012 elections and both perceptions of important party differences and feelings toward the opposing party among three types of partisans—strong identifiers, weak identifiers and leaning independents.

[Table 1 goes here]

The results in this table show that even after controlling for strength of party identification, perceptions of important party differences and feelings toward the opposing party had clear effects in the predicted direction on party loyalty.<sup>2</sup> Among strong identifiers, weak identifiers and leaning independents alike, those who perceived important party differences were much more likely to vote consistently for their party's candidates than those who did not perceive such differences. Likewise, those who rated the opposing party at 30 degrees or lower on the feeling thermometer scale were much more likely to vote consistently for their party's candidates than those who rated the opposing party at 50 degrees or higher.

As a further test of the negative partisanship theory, we conducted a logistic regression analysis of party loyalty among all voters identifying with a party, including leaning independents, in the 2014-2012 elections. For this analysis, the dependent variable is our dichotomous measure of consistent party loyalty. Our independent variables are strength of party identification, measured by dummy variables for strong party identifiers and weak party identifiers (with leaning independents as the contrast category); a dummy variable that measures whether a voter perceives important party differences; and feeling thermometer ratings by voters

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<sup>2</sup> All of these relationships are statistically significant at the .01 level based on one-tailed t-tests.

of their own party and the opposing party. The results of this logistic regression analysis are displayed in Table 2.

In these three elections, voters who perceived important differences between the two parties were more likely to be consistently loyal than those who do not perceive such differences. The coefficient estimate on this variable is .603 and is significant at the .001 level. Additionally, voters who identify as strong partisans are more likely than others to vote consistently for their party's candidates. Given the effect of our strong partisan identifier variable, the coefficient for weak partisans falls well short of statistical significance. The strongest predictors of partisan loyalty are voters' feeling thermometer ratings of their own party and the opposing party. Both of these variables are highly statistically significant predictors in the model ( $p < .001$ ) and, given the scale on which they are measured, both are substantively significant as well. However, the more important of these two variables is the assessment of the opposing party. As predicted by our negative partisanship theory, regardless of the strength of their attachment to their own party, the more voters dislike the opposing party, the greater the probability that they will vote consistently for their own party's candidates.

To facilitate comprehension of our model and to illustrate this phenomenon, we present a predicted probability graph of consistent party loyalty in the 2004, 2008 and 2012 elections depending on voters' ratings of the opposing party on the feeling thermometer scale. The estimates shown in Figure 6 are for strong party identifiers, with the "perceives important differences" variable and voters' ratings of their own party set at their mean values. Because our dummy variables for the 2008 and 2012 elections fall well short of reaching statistical significance, they are set to zero in the calculation of our predicted probabilities.

[Figure 6 goes here]

The results displayed in this figure show that the probability of consistent loyalty is much greater among strong party identifiers who dislike the opposing party than among those who are neutral or feel favorably toward the opposing party. For strong identifiers who rate the opposing party at zero on the feeling thermometer scale, the model predicts a 95 percent chance of consistent loyalty. As feeling thermometer ratings of the opposing party increase, the probability of consistent loyalty sharply declines. For strong identifiers rating the opposing party at 50 degrees, the model predicts only a 76 percent chance of consistent loyalty. Our results indicate that even among strong party identifiers, dislike of the opposing party is a strong predictor of party loyalty. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that along with increasing awareness of party differences, increasing negativism toward the opposing party has contributed significantly to the rise of party loyalty and straight ticket voting in recent years.

### **Nationalization of House Elections**

One of the most important consequences of growing party loyalty and straight ticket voting since the 1980s has been the increasing nationalization of congressional elections: a growing connection between the outcomes of presidential elections and the outcomes of congressional elections. This trend has been very evident in contests for the U.S. House of Representatives. In 2012, the correlation between the Democratic share of the U.S. House vote and the Democratic share of the presidential vote in districts with contested races was an astonishing .95. This was the strongest correlation for any election since data on the presidential vote in House districts became available in 1952. In the 2014 midterm election, the correlation between the Democratic share of the House vote and the Democratic share of the 2012 presidential vote across all districts with contested races was .94. This was the strongest correlation for any midterm election in the past sixty years.

There has been a very sharp increase in the connection between presidential and House elections since the 1970s: the correlation between the Democratic share of the House vote and the Democratic share of the presidential vote in districts with contested races averaged .54 between 1972 and 1980, .65 between 1982 and 1990, .78 between 1992 and 2000, .83 between 2002 and 2010 and .94 in 2012-2014. In terms of shared variance, the relationship between presidential and House elections is now three times stronger than it was in the 1970s.

These results indicate that there have been important changes in the determinants of House election outcomes over the past several decades. In particular, these results suggest the relative importance of district presidential partisanship may be increasing at the expense of more local factors, especially the personal advantage of incumbency. In order to test this hypothesis and to measure changes in the relative influence of presidential partisanship and incumbency on the outcomes of individual House races over time, we conducted regression analyses of these outcomes for each decade since the 1970s. Our dependent variable in these analyses is the Democratic percentage of the major party vote.

The independent variables in our regression equations are the Democratic share of the major party presidential vote in each district in relation to the nation, the party of the House incumbent, coded as +1 for contests with Democratic incumbents, 0 for open seat contests and -1 for contests with Republican incumbents. In addition, because our data is measured at the district-level and the errors in explaining election outcomes in district  $i$  at time  $t$  are likely to be correlated with outcomes in that same district at time  $t-2$ , we included election-year fixed effects in each model. For the sake of clarity in presentation, we did not include the estimates for the election-year fixed effects in Table 3.

[Table 3 goes here]

The results in Table 3 show that there were drastic changes in the effects of our two key independent variables during the five decades included in this analysis. The overall explanatory power of our model increased substantially over time. However, this increase was due entirely to the increased influence of district partisanship. An examination of the unstandardized regression coefficients shows that the effect of district presidential partisanship increased considerably over time with the largest increase occurring during the most recent time period. By contrast, the effect of incumbency decreased slightly during the 1990s and 2000s and then dropped dramatically in the most recent time period. Along the same lines, a comparison of the standardized regression coefficients for district partisanship and incumbency in each time period shows that the influence of district partisanship relative to incumbency increased somewhat during the 1990s and 2000s and then rose dramatically in the most recent time period. These results show that as the importance of district partisanship has grown in House elections, the personal advantage of incumbency has declined. As a result, compared with the 1970s and 1980s, the electoral fortunes of House incumbents now depend much less on how effectively they cultivate their constituencies and much more on the partisan makeup of those constituencies.

These results demonstrate that House elections have experienced a strong trend toward nationalization over the past several decades. The outcomes of House elections are now determined to a much greater degree than in the recent past by the relative strength of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates in House districts. This shift is readily apparent in Figure 7 which displays the trends in the percentage of House contests won by Democrats and Republicans in House districts that favor each party based on the results of presidential elections. The favored presidential party is determined here by the Democratic share

of the major party presidential vote in the district compared with the Democratic share of the major party presidential vote in the nation. A district in which the Democratic share of the major party presidential vote is greater than the Democratic share of the major party presidential vote in the nation is considered a Democratic-leaning district while a district in which the Democratic share of the major party presidential vote is less than the Democratic share of the major party presidential vote in the nation is considered a Republican-leaning district.<sup>3</sup>

[Figure 7 goes here]

The results displayed in Figure 7 show that since 1990 there has been a very sharp increase in the proportion of House contests won by the candidate of the favored presidential party. However this increase has been much greater in Republican-leaning districts than in Democratic-leaning districts. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, Republicans won less than 60 percent of House races in districts that were more Republican than the nation in presidential elections. In contrast, during this time period, Democrats won about 80 percent of House races that were more Democratic than the nation in presidential elections. Since 1994, however, and especially since 2010, GOP candidates have enjoyed much more success in Republican-leaning districts. This improvement in Republican fortunes is directly related to the increasing connection between presidential and House voting.

The Republican takeover of the House in the 2010 midterm election was due largely to the party's gains in Republican-leaning districts. Prior to the 2010 election, Republicans held only 165 out of 232 House seats in Republican-leaning districts. Republicans captured 52 of the 67 Democratic seats in these Republican-leaning districts. As a result, the Republican share of seats in these districts went from 71 percent to 94 percent. In contrast, the Republican share of seats in

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<sup>3</sup> By controlling for short-term factors favoring one party or the other in a specific presidential election, this measure provides a more accurate gauge of the underlying partisan orientation of House districts than simply using the winner of the presidential election.

Democratic-leaning House districts rose only slightly, from seven percent in 2010 to 13 percent in 2012.

In the most recent time period, 2012-2014, there has been an extremely strong relationship between presidential and House voting. As a result, in these elections Republicans have won a remarkable 95 percent of contests in Republican-leaning districts while Democrats have won 93 percent of contests in Democratic-leaning districts. However, this pattern of strong partisan consistency has worked to the advantage of Republicans because there are many more Republican-leaning districts than Democratic-leaning districts.

Based on the 2012 presidential election results, there are currently 240 Republican-leaning districts compared with only 195 Democratic-leaning districts. This is partly a result of partisan gerrymandering by Republican state legislatures in the aftermath of the GOP's big gains in the 2010 midterm elections. However, this Republican advantage is not new. Republicans have long enjoyed an advantage in House elections as a result of the fact that, from the standpoint of winning individual seats, Democratic voters are inefficiently distributed across House districts (Erikson 1972, 2002; Chen and Rodden 2009; Rodden 2010; Sides and McGhee 2013; Cohn 2014). What has changed in recent years is not the proportion of Republican-leaning districts. It is the ability of Republicans to convert their advantage in district presidential partisanship into actual majorities of House seats and this change is directly attributable to the nationalization of House elections.

### **Nationalization of Senate Elections**

Senate elections have also become increasingly nationalized in recent years. The trend there has been very similar to the trend in House elections but even more dramatic because the connection between presidential and Senate elections was considerably weaker than the

connection between presidential and House elections as recently as the early 1990s. Thus, the correlation between the Democratic share of the Senate vote and the Democratic share of the presidential vote in states with contested Senate races was only .22 in 1992 and only .21 in 1994. In sharp contrast, the correlation was .84 in 2010, .80 in 2012 and .89 in 2014. The average correlation between the Democratic share of the presidential vote and the Democratic share of the Senate vote in states with contested races has risen from .42 between 1992 and 2000 to .66 between 2002 and 2010 and to .84 in 2012-2014. This means that, in terms of shared variance, the relationship is now more than four times stronger than it was during the 1990s.

As was true for House elections, these results indicate that there have been important changes in the determinants of Senate election outcomes over the past three decades. And just as with House elections, these results suggest the relative importance of presidential partisanship has been increasing at the expense of more local factors, especially the personal advantage of incumbency. In order to test this hypothesis and to measure changes in the relative influence of presidential partisanship and incumbency on the outcomes of individual Senate races over time, we conducted regression analyses of these outcomes for each decade since the 1990s. Our dependent variable in these analyses is the Democratic percentage of the major party vote.

The independent variables in our Senate regression equations are the Democratic share of the major party presidential vote in each state in relation to the nation, the party of the incumbent, coded as +1 for contests with Democratic incumbents, 0 for open seat contests and -1 for contests with Republican incumbents. In addition, because our data is measured at the state-level and the errors in explaining election outcomes in state  $i$  at time  $t$  are likely to be correlated with outcomes in that same state at time  $t-6$ , we included election-year fixed effects in each

model. For the sake of clarity in presentation, we did not include the estimates for the election-year fixed effects in Table 4.

[Table 4 goes here]

The results in Table 4 show the trends in Senate elections were very similar to those that we found in House elections. There were drastic changes in the effects of our two key independent variables during the three decades included in this analysis. The overall explanatory power of our model increased substantially over time and, as with House elections, this increase was due entirely to the increased influence of presidential partisanship. An examination of the unstandardized regression coefficients shows that the effect of state presidential partisanship increased considerably over time with the largest increase occurring during the most recent time period. As was true for House elections, the effect of incumbency declined dramatically in the most recent time period. A comparison of the standardized regression coefficients for state partisanship and incumbency in each time period shows that the influence of state partisanship relative to incumbency increased somewhat during the 2000s and then rose dramatically in the most recent time period. As in the case of House elections, these results show that as the importance of partisanship has grown in Senate elections, the personal advantage of incumbency has declined. As a result, the electoral fortunes of Senate incumbents, like the electoral fortunes of House incumbents, now depend less on their personal popularity and more on the partisan makeup of their states than in the past.

Just as was the case for House elections, the nationalization of Senate elections has resulted in a sharp increase in consistency between the outcomes of these two types of elections. We classified states as Democratic-leaning or Republican-leaning in the same way that we classified House districts. States in which the Democratic presidential candidate's share of the major party

vote was greater than his share of the national major party vote were classified as Democratic-leaning while those in which the Democratic presidential candidate's share of the major party vote was less than his share of the national major party vote were classified as Republican-leaning. Figure 8 displays the trends in the proportions of Senate contests won by the Democratic candidate in Democratic-leaning states and by the Republican candidate in Republican-leaning states over the past three decades.

[Figure 8 goes here]

The results in this figure show that since the 1990s there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of Senate races won by the advantaged party. This trend has been somewhat stronger in Democratic-leaning states but it is very evident in Republican-leaning states as well.

Democratic-leaning states are now much more likely to elect Democratic senators than they were during the 1990s and Republican-leaning states are now much more likely to elect Republican senators than they were during the 1990s. Thus, in 2014, 33 of 36 Senate contests were won by the candidate of the advantaged party—Democrats won 12 of 15 contests in states that were more Democratic than the nation in the 2012 presidential election and Republicans won all 21 contests in states that were more Republican than the nation in the 2012 presidential election.

The results of presidential elections in the states since 1992 show that just as in House elections, Republicans enjoyed a significant advantage in Senate elections as a result of the way supporters of the two parties are distributed across Senate districts—the 50 states. In the case of Senate elections, this advantage reflects the fact that Democratic voters are heavily concentrated in the large urban areas of the nation's most populous states. However, these states have the same number of senators as sparsely populated, predominantly rural states which tend to elect Republicans. As a result, in the 12 elections between 1992 and 2012 there were substantially

more Republican-leaning states than Democratic-leaning states. Altogether, 57 percent of Senate races during these years took place in states in which the Republican share of the presidential vote was above the national average.

There was considerable variation in the proportion of Republican-leaning states across the three Senate classes. Only 48 percent of states with class one Senate seats—those elected in 1994, 2000, 2006 and 2012—leaned Republican. In contrast, 64 percent of states with class two Senate seats—those elected in 1996, 2002, 2008 and 2014—leaned Republican and 59 percent of states with class three Senate seats—those elected in 1992, 1998, 2004 and 2010—leaned Republican. The results of Senate elections between 1992 and 2014 generally reflected the relative partisan tilt of each class: during these years Republican candidates won only 38 percent of Senate contests in class one states compared with 59 percent of Senate contests in class two states and 54 percent of Senate contests in class three states.

The results displayed in Figure 8 show that between the 1992-2000 elections and the 2012-2014 elections, both parties substantially improved their performance in states in which they were advantaged based on presidential election results. In each decade, however, Democratic candidates won a somewhat larger share of seats in Democratic-leaning states than Republican candidates won in Republican-leaning states. In the 2012-2014 elections, for example, Democratic candidates won 88 percent (30 of 34) of contests in Democratic-leaning states while Republican candidates won 80 percent (28 of 35) of contests in Republican-leaning states.

The success of Democratic candidates in winning Senate races in Republican-leaning states was a crucial factor in the party's ability to hold and slightly expand its majority in the upper chamber in the 2012 election. In that year, Democrats won seven of 14 races in Republican-leaning states as well as 18 of 19 contests in Democratic-leaning states. In 2014, however,

Republicans won all 21 contests in Republican-leaning states including seven races for seats previously held by Democrats. Republicans also won three of the 15 contests in Democratic-leaning states including two races for seats previously held by Democrats. The result was a gain of nine seats for Republicans giving them a total of 54 seats and control of the Senate for the first time in eight years.

By 2016, Republicans will have held a majority of the seats in the House of Representatives for 18 out of 24 years. But they will have held a majority of the seats in the Senate for only 12 of those 24 years. Democrats have fared better in recent Senate elections than in recent House elections because of their success in winning Senate contests in states that lean Republican in presidential elections. The question now is whether, given the increasing nationalization of Senate elections, Democrats will be able to continue winning such contests in the future. If they cannot, we may see a Republican advantage in Senate elections similar the party's recent advantage in House elections.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Regardless of the strength of their attachment to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party, American voters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are much more likely to hold strongly negative views of the opposing party than in the past. The rise of this sort of negative partisanship in the American electorate has led to the highest rates of party loyalty and straight ticket voting in the past sixty years. As a result, to a much greater degree than at any time in the previous 50 years, the outcomes of House and Senate elections reflect the relative strength of the presidential parties in the 435 House districts and the 50 states.

As the influence of presidential partisanship has risen, the personal advantage of incumbency has decreased. This has made it much more difficult for incumbents in difficult

districts or states to survive by cultivating their constituencies. The overwhelming majority of House and Senate races now are won by the party that is favored based on the presidential vote in the district or state. This growing nationalization of congressional elections has important consequences for party performance, representative democracy, and governance.

First, our results suggest that the recent Republican advantage in House elections is likely to persist for some time. The most important factor explaining the current Republican advantage in House elections is the inefficient distribution of Democratic voters in the electorate combined with the increasingly partisan behavior of the American electorate. As a result, Republican House candidates are now winning over 90 percent of districts that are more Republican than the national average in presidential elections. While Republican candidates are doing worse in Democratic-leaning districts than they did in the past, there are fewer such districts and their performance in them has declined only slightly over time. Republicans enjoy a similar advantage in Senate elections due to the extreme overrepresentation of sparsely populated rural states and the fact that Democratic voters are heavily concentrated in more populous states with large urban areas. Until 2014, Democrats were able to overcome this disadvantage by winning a somewhat larger share of Senate contests in Republican-leaning states than Republicans were able to win in Democratic-leaning states. Given the growing nationalization of Senate elections, however, it is unclear whether Democrats will be able to continue winning enough seats in Republican-leaning states to offset the GOP's natural advantage in Senate elections.

In addition to making election outcomes more predictable, the rise of negative partisanship and the growing nationalization of American politics have had important consequences for representation in the House and the Senate. The growing proportions of districts and states that strongly favor one party combined with the increasingly partisan behavior of the electorate mean

that representation of constituents' policy preferences is almost entirely limited to partisan representation. There is no incentive for most members of Congress to consider the views of supporters of the opposing party. They are unlikely to win many of their votes and they generally do not need their votes. As a result, most Republicans are only concerned about the preferences of Republican voters in their district or state and most Democrats are only concerned about the preferences of Democratic voters in their district or state.

Today, only a relatively small number of members who represent districts or states that tilt toward the opposing party are likely to be concerned about winning over voters outside of their own party. However, these members are finding this task increasingly difficult as the personal advantage of incumbency diminishes. Thus, Republican gains in the 2014 Senate elections were aided by the inability of Democratic incumbents to use their personal popularity to overcome their party's growing unpopularity in states such as Arkansas, Alaska and Louisiana.

The rise of partisan representation has had a substantial impact on the legislative process itself. While Mayhew (2002) found that divided party control of government did not lead to a decline in legislative productivity during an earlier time period, our results suggest that this conclusion may not be valid in the current era of intensified partisan polarization. Most members of Congress have little reason to be concerned with "reaching across the aisle" to work with leaders and members of the opposing party. In fact, doing so can actually be risky to one's political career. With divided government likely to be a frequent occurrence and little or no incentive for bipartisan compromise, our findings suggest that confrontation and gridlock are almost certain to characterize the policy-making process in Washington for the foreseeable future.

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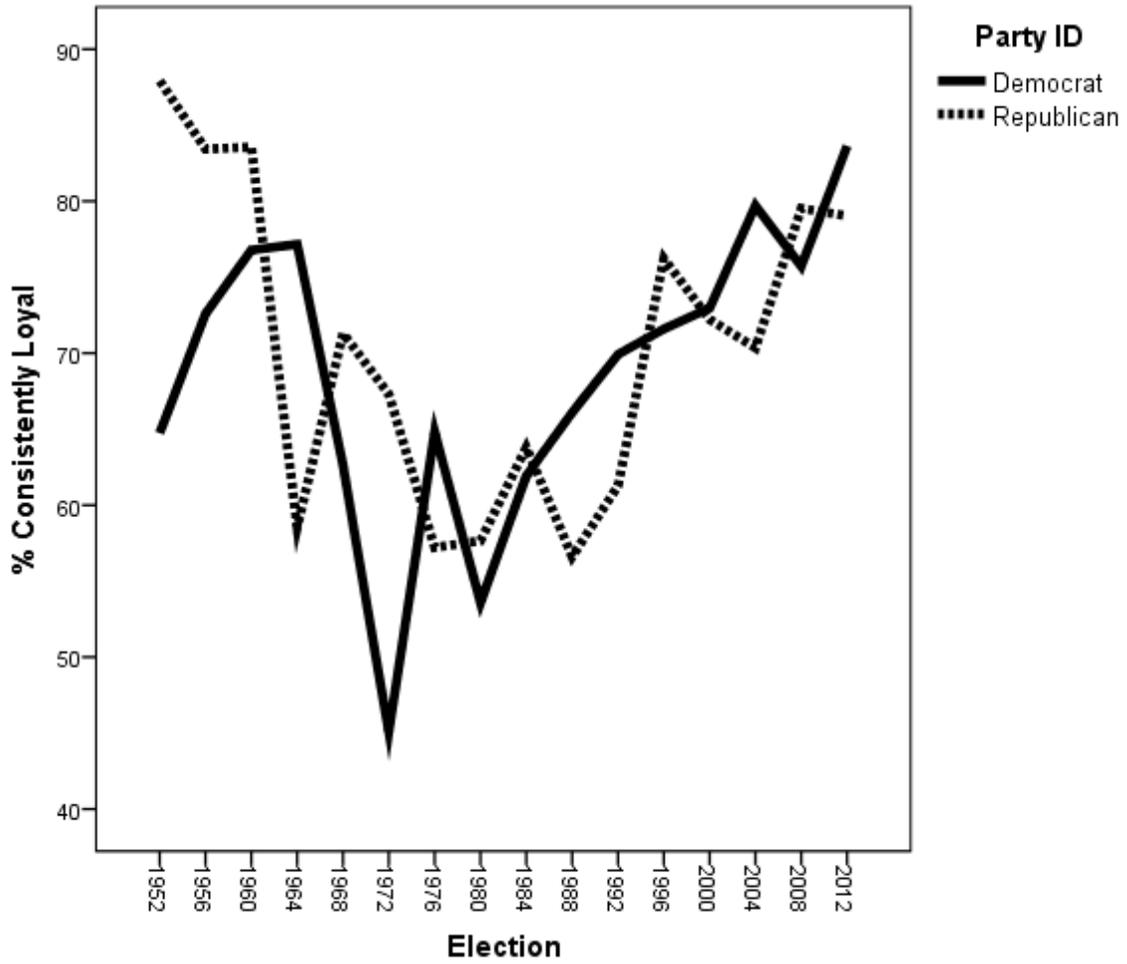
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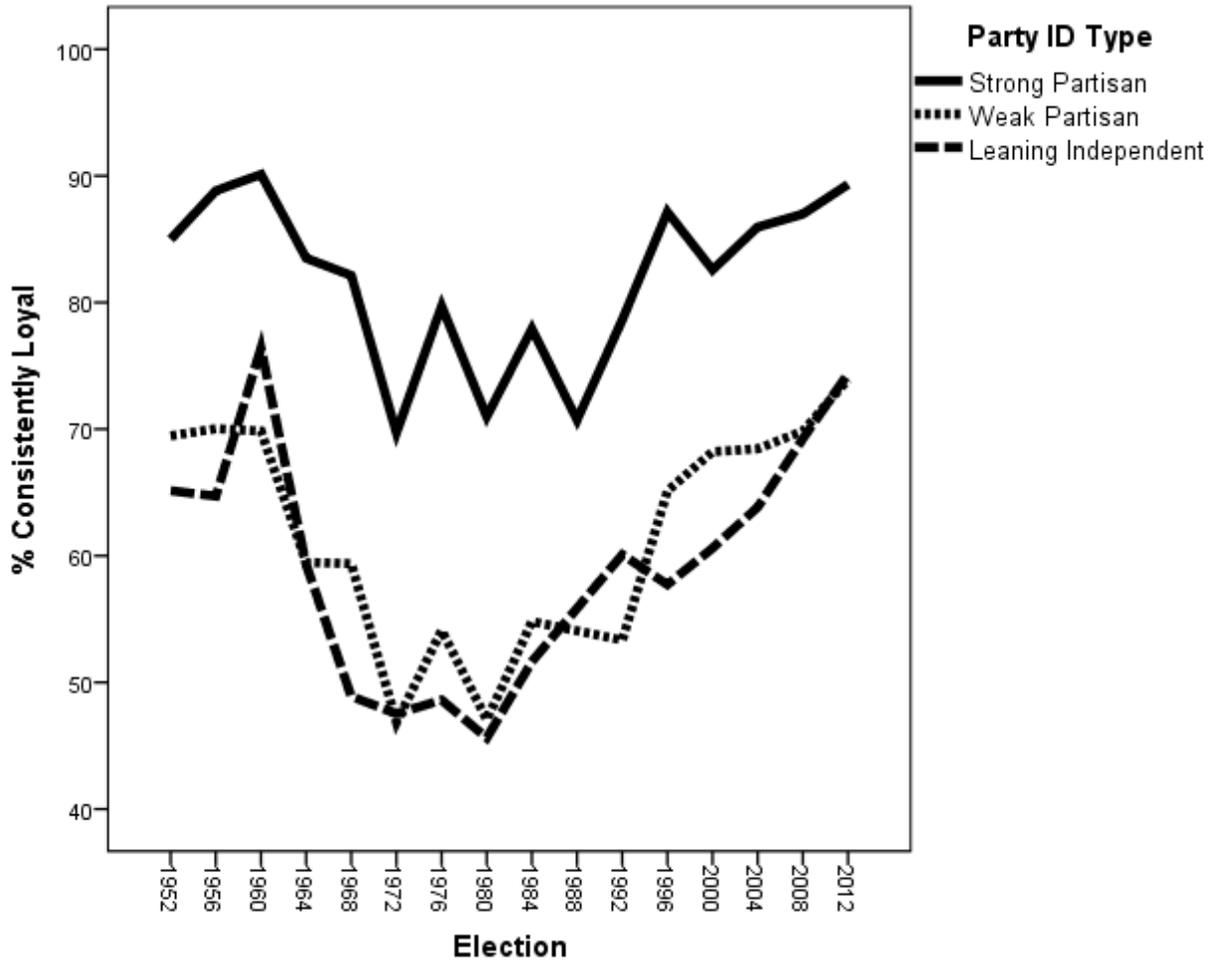
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Figure 1  
Trends in Consistent Party Loyalty among Democratic and  
Republican Voters, 1952-2012



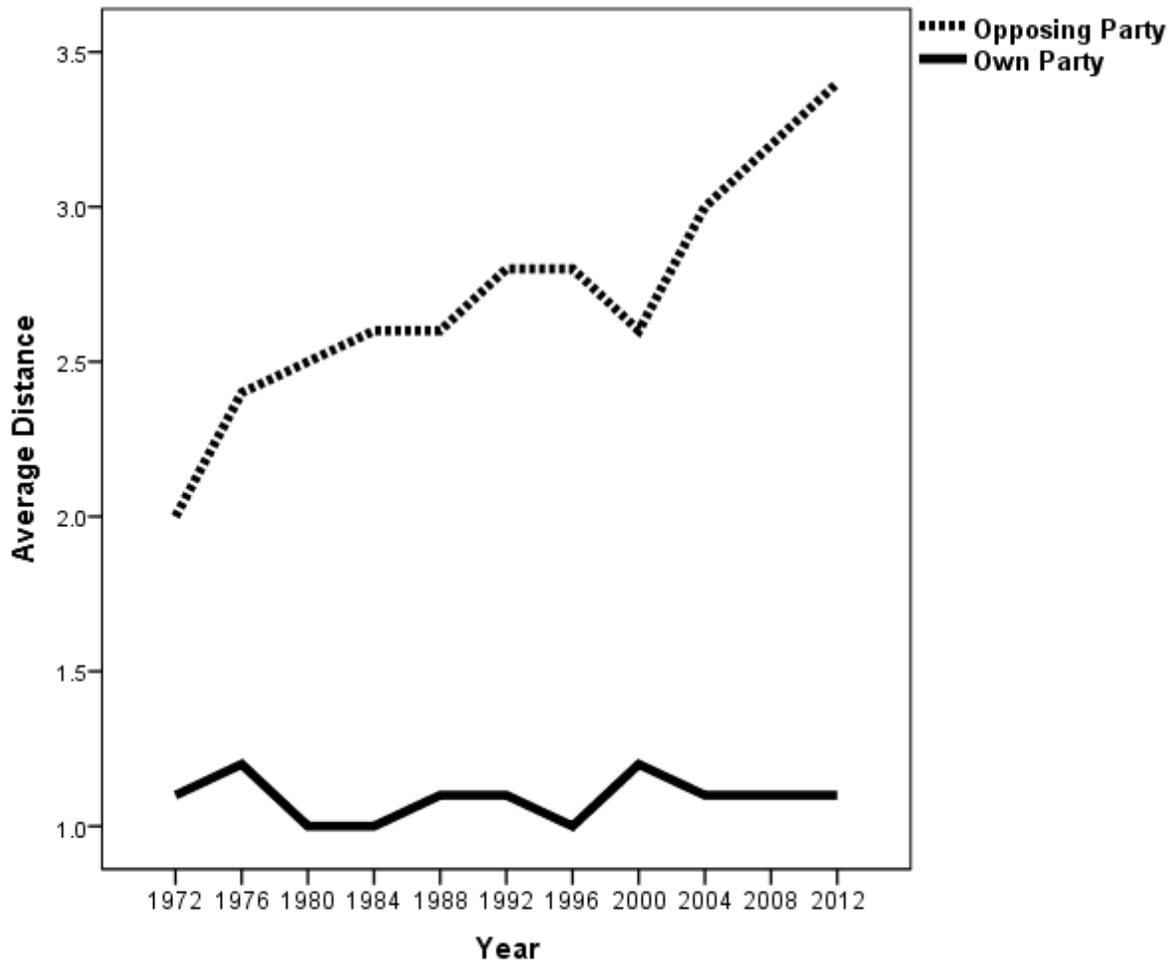
Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File

Figure 2  
Trends in Consistent Party Loyalty among Strong, Weak and Leaning Party Identifiers, 1952-2012



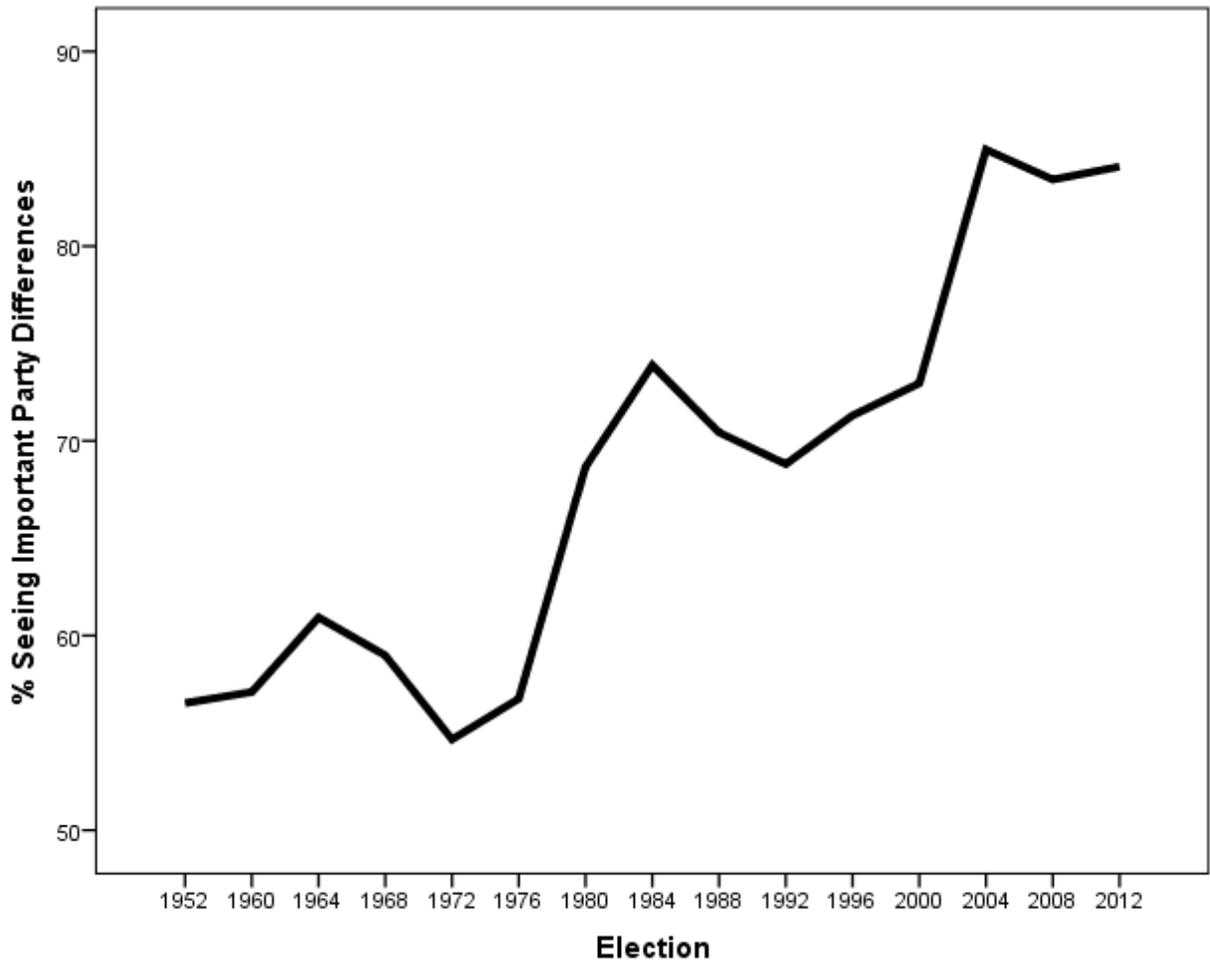
Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File

Figure 3  
Mean Distance from Own Party and Opposing Party on Liberal-Conservative  
Scale, 1972-2012



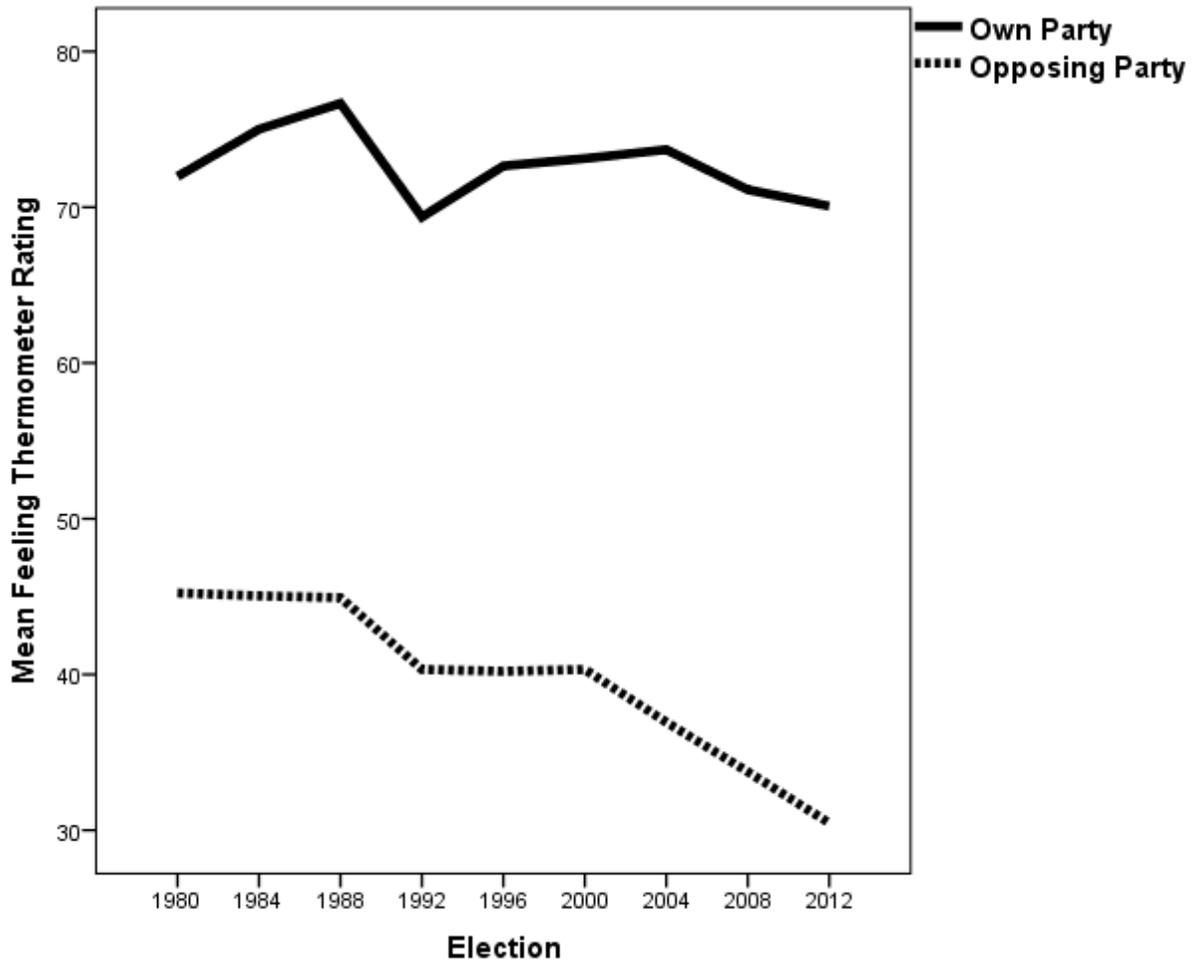
Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File

Figure 4  
Percentage of Voters Perceiving Important Party Differences, 1952-2012



Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File

Figure 5  
Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Own Party and Opposing Party, 1980-2012



Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File

Table 1  
 Party Loyalty among Strong, Weak and Leaning Partisans in 2004-2012 Elections by  
 Perception of Important Party Differences and Feelings toward Opposing Party

	Strong Identifiers	Weak Identifiers	Leaning Independents
Important Party Differences			
Yes	90	74	74
No	67	49	58
FT Rating of Opposing Party			
0-30 degrees	94	87	82
31-49 degrees	81	72	76
50 degrees +	70	54	52

Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File

Note: Entries shown are percentages of voters consistently loyal to their party in presidential, House and Senate elections

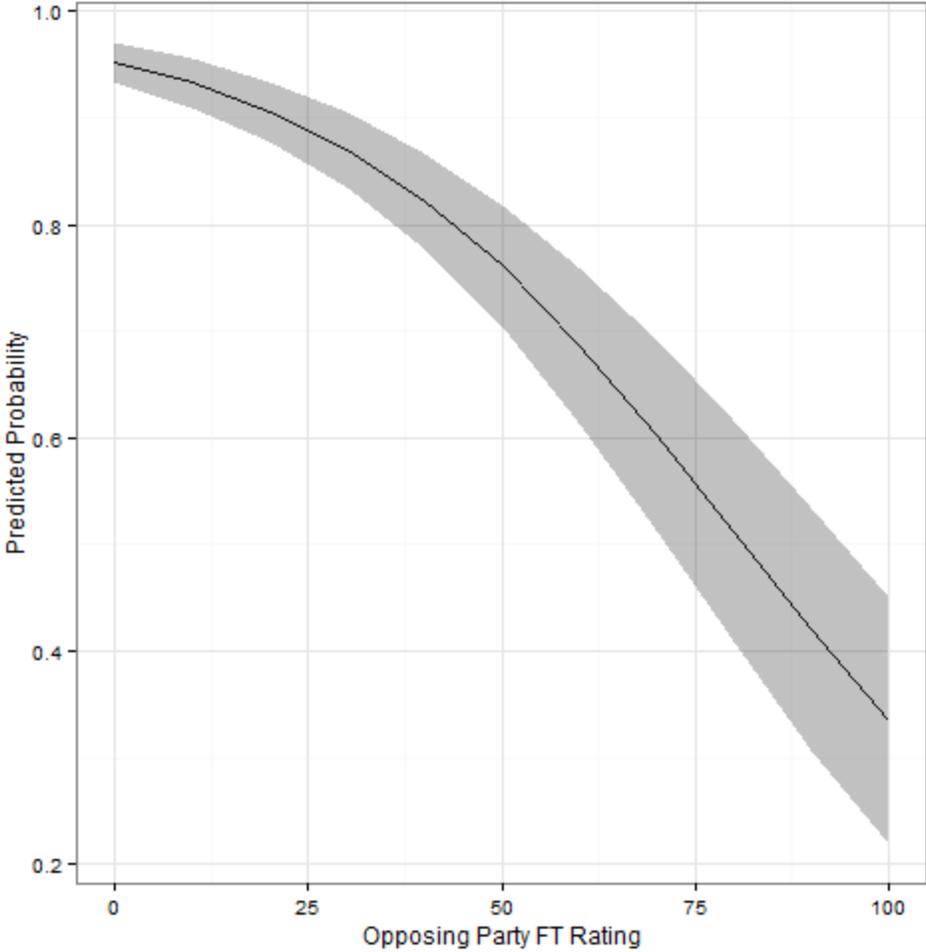
Table 2  
Results of Logistic Regression Analysis of Party Loyalty in 2004-2012 Elections

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable: Consistent Loyalty
Strong Partisan	.572*** (.172)
Weak Partisan	.146 (.160)
Own Party FT	.020*** (.004)
Opposing Party FT	-.037*** (.004)
Important Differences	.603*** (.164)
2008 Election	.047 (.164)
2012 Election	.166 (.163)
Constant	.411 (.362)
Observations	1758
Log Likelihood	-758.64

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05 \*\*\*p<0.01

Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File

Figure 6  
Estimated Probability of Consistent Party Loyalty in 2008 and 2012 Elections by Feeling  
Thermometer Rating of Opposing Party



Source: American National Election Study Cumulative File

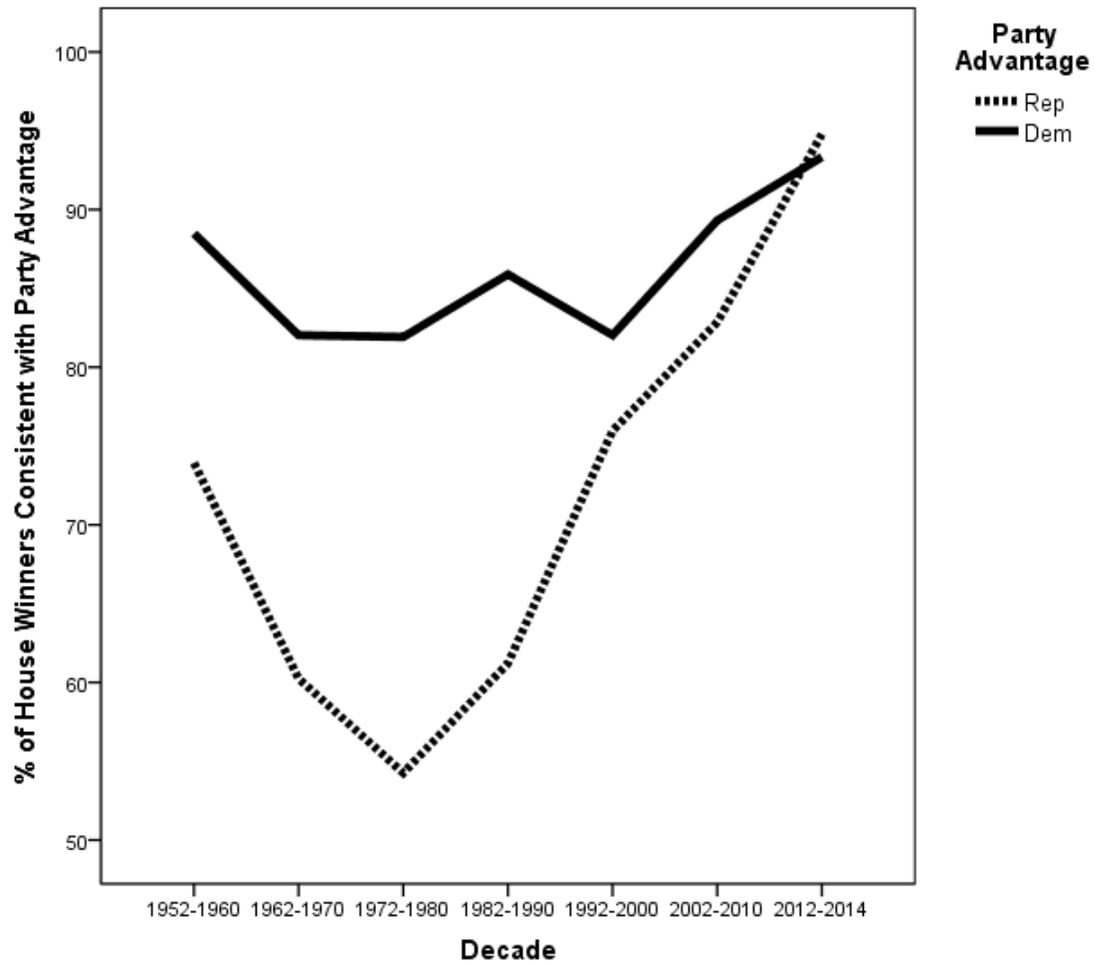
Table 3  
Results of Regression Analyses of House Election Outcomes by Decade

Decade	Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	Sig.	R2
1972-80	(Constant)	50.656	.450		.001	.75
	Dist Partisan	.546	.020	.341	.001	
	Inc Party	12.855	.241	.671	.001	
1982-90	(Constant)	54.538	.404		.001	.82
	Dist Partisan	.535	.018	.342	.001	
	Inc Party	13.416	.222	.691	.001	
1992-00	(Constant)	51.941	.346		.001	.84
	Dist Partisan	.676	.015	.487	.001	
	Inc Party	10.585	.202	.564	.001	
2002-10	(Constant)	49.481	.334		.001	.88
	Dist Partisan	.673	.013	.516	.001	
	Inc Party	9.942	.197	.521	.001	
2012-14	(Constant)	52.005	.231		.001	.93
	Dist Partisan	.843	.016	.747	.001	
	Inc Party	4.847	.260	.264	.001	

Note: Dependent variable is percentage of major party vote for Democratic House candidate. All models include election-year fixed effects which are not shown.

Sources: Gary Jacobson and data compiled by authors.

Figure 7  
Percentage of House Winners Consistent with Presidential Party Advantage by Decade



Sources: Gary Jacobson and data compiled by authors

Table 4  
Results of Regression Analyses of Senate Election Outcomes by Decade

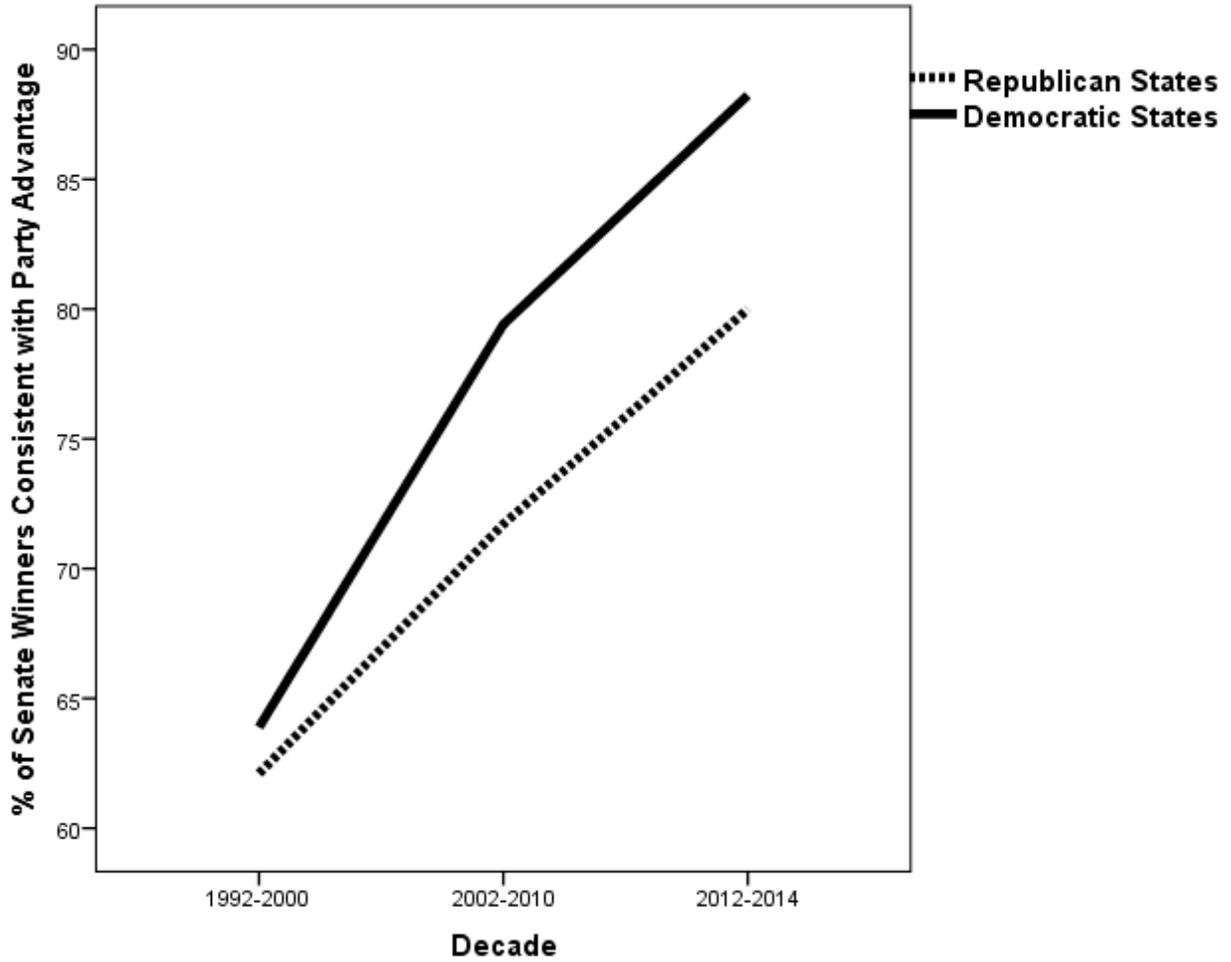
Decade	Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	Sig.	R2
1992-00	(Constant)	53.297	1.470		.001	.59
	State Partisan	.461	.092	.267	.001	
	Inc Party	9.468	.791	.643	.001	
2002-10	(Constant)	51.306	1.492		.001	.70
	State Partisan	.602	.080	.376	.001	
	Inc Party	9.156	.820	.554	.001	
2012-14	(Constant)	53.070	.866		.001	.86
	State Partisan	.683	.064	.588	.001	
	Inc Party	6.112	.832	.402	.001	

Note: Dependent variable is percentage of major party vote for Democratic Senate candidate. All models include election-year fixed effects which are not shown.

Sources: Gary Jacobson and data compiled by authors.

Figure 8

Percentage of Senate Winners Consistent with Presidential Party Advantage by Decade



Source: Data compiled by authors