Quote of the Day:

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

-- George Wallace, while running as a third-party candidate for president, 1968
Parties and Party Polarization

Polarization: the distance between the parties. Depends on (a) the average position of party members, and (b) the degree of party unity.

Need to distinguish elite and mass polarization. Elite polarization has increased greatly, though with Republicans moving right faster than Democrats are moving left (“asymmetric polarization”).
Elite polarization has also occurred at the state level, albeit with variation from state to state.

Why do we care about polarization? In part because it increases gridlock and makes it harder to address the nation’s problems.

What has caused the increasing polarization?
Political scientists have proposed several causes of congressional polarization, including:

- income inequality
- realignment of the South
- stronger aggregate party competition after 1994
- weaker district and state competition
- less socializing among members of Congress
- feedback from the base
Potential cause #1: income inequality.
Income inequality might have caused polarization by making redistributive and other economic questions, on which the parties differ greatly, more prominent.
Potential cause #2: realignment of the South

As a legacy of Reconstruction, the South from 1880 to the 1950s was overwhelmingly Democratic. Responding first to civil rights and later to other social issues, the South became mostly Republican by the 1990s.

Replacing conservative Southern Democrats in Congress with conservative Southern Republicans pushed Democrats to the left and Republicans to the right (i.e., polarization)
Potential cause #3: stronger aggregate party competition after 1994


1995 to 2016: Back-and-forth control over each chamber, usually with close margins, mostly favoring Republicans

To promote the party brand, the parties are now more unified and (especially among Republicans) less willing to compromise with the other party
The Republicans’ resistance to compromise partly reflects their base in the mass public:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological Consistency</th>
<th>Make Compromises</th>
<th>Stick to Their Positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consistently conservative</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly conservative</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly liberal</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistently liberal</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Note: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A).

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Potential cause #4: weaker district and state competition

The number of competitive House districts has been cut in half in the last two decades.
The number of battleground states in presidential elections has also declined, even when the race is close nationally:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of States with a margin &lt; 5%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12 (emergence of red state/blue state language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With weaker district and state competition, fewer legislators had to appeal to constituents from both parties. Meanwhile, Republicans began worrying about getting primaried. All of that fueled polarization.
Potential cause #5: less socializing among members of Congress. Fewer of them relocate their families to Washington, DC. They normally fly home for weekends.

Potential cause #6: Feedback from the base. Elite polarization led to greater mass polarization, in turn increasing elite polarization.
10-item scale of political values in the mass public:
Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

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

Source: Pew Research Center
A more partisan media environment also contributed to mass polarization.

- Rise of television news in the 1950s, generally centrist, high viewership (nothing else on TV).
- CNN (centrist) launched in 1980. Cable television spread in the 1980s, but still few partisan outlets.

The results: (a) fewer people follow political news; (b) those who do spend more time on it; (c) news followers pick sources (including social media) that reinforce their biases, thereby increasing polarization.
Moderates participate in politics much less than consistent conservatives or liberals, which further increases polarization.

*Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public*

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

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Political Activism on the Left and the Right

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

- Contacted an elected official
- Attended a campaign event
- Worked or volunteered for a candidate or campaign

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Note: Bars represent the level of participation at each point on a 10 question scale of ideological consistency. Figures are reported on the five ideological consistency groups used throughout the report (see Appendix A).
Despite these changes, the overall pattern remains as:

Elite polarization > polarization in the active public > polarization in the inactive public