

Asymmetrical Polarization: How Something Many Voters Have Never Heard Of Has Been
Shaping Public Policy For Decades

Since the 1980's, the asymmetrical polarization of the two major political parties in the US has negatively impacted the making of public policy.

Asymmetrical polarization is a relatively new dynamic in American politics, in which the Democratic and Republican parties are diverging from moderate political ideology at different rates. When examining a graph on UCLA's Voteview website, a severe inequality in the two parties' degree of polarization over time is found ("Parties at a glance"). The polarization is measured by using a scale from -1 (very liberal) to 1 (very conservative), and the graph shows the mean ideology of all members of Congress (split by party), based on how each member votes. This dynamic can be best illustrated by comparing the mean ideologies of the 96th (1980), 104th (1994), and 116th (current) Congresses. At these three points, Democrats measured -0.32, -0.36, and -0.4 respectively ("Parties at a glance"). In contrast, Republicans' mean ideology at these intervals were 0.28, 0.38, and 0.51 ("Parties at a glance"). Clearly, the Republican Party has become dramatically more conservative, while the Democratic Party's ideology has shown only minimal movement towards very liberal, as defined by UCLA's Voteview tracker. The 96th Congress marks the beginning of this asymmetry, which only accelerated with the 1994 Republican Contract with America and the divisive politics of today. Asymmetrical polarization hampers bipartisan policy making, which produces suboptimal public policies. In the worst cases it leads to legislative gridlock.

Making optimal policy requires bipartisan support, compromise between parties, and educated voters who hold their elected officials accountable. When considering that many voters

acquire their information from large media sources such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, this process for making optimal policy loses the key aspect of having educated voters. Due to these media networks relying on keeping the largest number of viewers, they cannot report on a Congress so deeply affected by asymmetrical polarization without distorting their coverage of Congress to appear more symmetric. Even when one party is growing severely more extreme than the other, media networks must treat the polarization as symmetric so as to not appear biased and offend viewers. This obstruction of the truth creates misinformed voters out of the same people who hold their elected officials accountable. These voters pressure their elected officials to act according to the distorted information they receive, and any member of Congress wishing to be reelected must seriously consider input from misinformed voters. Members of Congress who ignore this pressure do so at their own peril. In addition, this pressure may manifest itself not in substandard policy, but in a lack of policy.

To safeguard chances of reelection, members of Congress may find it safer to not act, rather than risk offending their voters. Two data sets which give insight into this inaction are the mean political ideology of the GOP and the number of legislative actions during each Congress. Overlaying the two data sets shows a negative correlation between mean political ideology and number of legislative actions. The most dramatic example of legislative inaction occurs in the four year period from the beginning of the 95th to the end of the 96th Congress. The 96th Congress enacted 68 fewer laws and performed 7,723 fewer actions than the 95th Congress while the MPI of its Republican members rose by 0.02 in mean party ideology, an increase which marks the dramatic acceleration in the GOP's polarization ("Parties at a glance") ("Historical Statistics About Legislation in the U.S. Congress -- GovTrack.us"). Since the 96th, which is a 38-year time span, the mean political ideology of the Republican Party has increased

by .23 and the number of enacted laws has decreased by 86 ("Parties at a glance") ("Historical Statistics About Legislation in the U.S. Congress -- GovTrack.us"). This correlation, combined with the quote from Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell stating "The single most important thing we want to accomplish is for President Obama to be a one-term president", suggests that, as GOP Congress members become more conservative, they also become less likely to cooperate and compromise with the Democratic Party (Barr). This lack of legislation is not common across both parties, as the mean number of enacted laws (since the 96th Congress) while the Republican Party had control of the House is about 451, but when the Democratic Party had control of the House, the mean number of enacted laws was 598.3 ("Historical Statistics About Legislation in the U.S. Congress -- GovTrack.us") (*"Party Divisions of the House of Representatives, 1789 to Present"*). Such evidence leads to the conclusion that the GOP has been by far less likely to cooperate with their opposition than the Democratic Party.

Asymmetrical polarization has been affecting policy making since the 1980's through the enactment of substandard policy and legislative inaction. These effects negatively impact the creation of public policy to the point where trust in the government erodes. In order to combat the exacerbation of asymmetrical polarization and its negative effects, we as a society need to recognize this dynamic, responsibly gather information, and stay active in correctly holding elected officials accountable.

Works Cited

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