



The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S. elections in the 21st century

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important developments affecting electoral competition in the United States has been the increasingly partisan behavior of the American electorate. Yet more voters than ever claim to be independents. We argue that the explanation for these seemingly contradictory trends is the rise of negative partisanship. Using data from the American National Election Studies, we show that as partisan identities have become more closely aligned with social, cultural and ideological divisions in American society, party supporters including leaning independents have developed increasingly negative feelings about the opposing party and its candidates. This has led to dramatic increases in party loyalty and straight-ticket voting, a steep decline in the advantage of incumbency and growing consistency between the results of presidential elections and the results of House, Senate and even state legislative elections. The rise of negative partisanship has had profound consequences for electoral competition, 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 the nation's 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 et al., 2001; Theriault, 2008; 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 et al., 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). And deep party divisions are not 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 resurgence of partisanship in American politics has not been 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 increasingly partisan behavior of the American electorate. In this article 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 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, Senate and even state legislative 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.

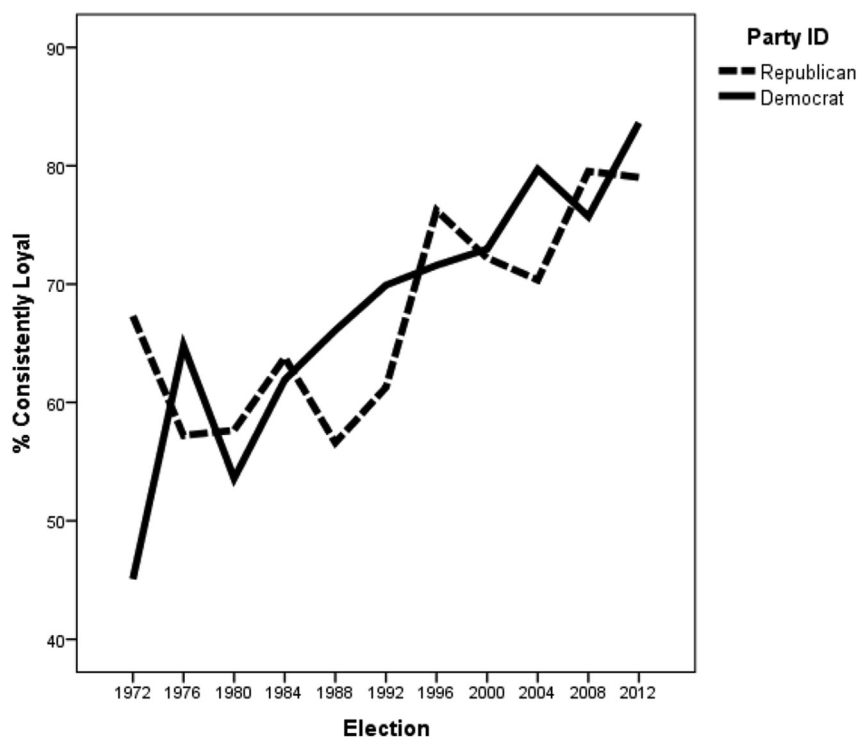
1. The growth of partisan behavior: party loyalty and straight-ticket voting

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.¹ That tied the record first set in 2004 and

¹ 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.

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Note: Leaning independents included with party identifiers

Fig. 1. Trends in consistent party loyalty among democratic and Republican voters, 1972–2012.
Source: ANES Cumulative File.

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 (Bartels, 2000; Hetherington, 2001; Green et al., 2002). Moreover, the rise of partisan behavior has involved supporters of both major parties. This can be seen in Fig. 1 which displays the trends in consistent party loyalty among Democratic and Republican identifiers, including leaning independents, between 1972 and 2012. Consistent loyalty here means voting for the candidates of your own party for President, House of Representatives and U.S. Senate in the same election.

The results in Fig. 1 show that party loyalty among Democrats and Republicans has increased dramatically since the 1980s. Among all party supporters 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 supporters 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.

The sharp increase in party loyalty in voting documented in Fig. 1 was not simply a result of party realignment in the South. Party loyalty has increased substantially in every region of the United States since the 1970s. In fact, the largest increase in party loyalty among voters was not in the South but in the Northeast. Between the 1972–80 elections and the 2004–2012 elections, the average rate of consistent loyalty increased from 55 percent to 78 percent in the South, from 54 percent to 79 percent in the Northeast, from 60 percent to 75 percent in the Midwest and from 63 percent to 83 percent in the West. Resurgent partisanship in voting behavior is clearly a national phenomenon.

It is puzzling that record levels of party loyalty and straight-ticket voting in elections have occurred at the same time that the proportion of Americans identifying with either major party has reached its lowest level in recent history. 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, 2015).

It appears that a large proportion of American voters today are reluctant to openly acknowledge any affiliation with a political

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