

U.S. National Elections

17.263/264

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Week 5: Parties

The Debates

- How did you watch?

Themes of the Day

- Party is the **most important** factor influencing voters' political understandings and choices.
- Party is an (emotional) **identity** and a (rational) **heuristic**.
- The size and composition of the party coalitions define the balance of **power** and terms of political **conflict**.
- Party elites have **polarized**, whereas citizens have **sorted**.

What Is a Party?

Several definitions:

- Team of **politicians** (“office seekers”) cooperating to win electoral office
- Coalition of **interest groups and activists** (“policy seekers”) seeking control of and benefits from government
- **Voters** (like consumers) **not included** in the party

Why Parties?

Solve several problems:

- Regulate access to ballot through nominations (**coordination** problem)
- Mobilizing resources and voters (**collective action** problem)
- Structuring political decisions (problem of **social choice**)

Party in the Electorate

- Three aspects:
 - Party in government
 - Party as organization
 - Party in the electorate
- Party Identification (PID)
 - Classic definition (*The American Voter*, 1960): a voter's enduring **emotional attachment** to the party as social group
 - socialized (like religion)
 - pre-political
 - perceptual screen

Updates to Classic PID

Rational Choice

- PID based on policy preferences/ideology
- Information-saving decision rule (heuristic)
- Updated quickly based on experience (“running tally”)

Social Identity (*Partisan Hearts and Minds*)

- Identification “with” vs. identification “as”
- Self-categorization based on party coalitions
→ What kind of person is a Democrat? A Republican?
- Group competition and group status

Partisan Bias?

How do partisans respond to new information?

- Example: the presidential debate
 - Did Democrats, Republicans, and Independents have different impressions?
 - Explanation based on emotional **bias**?
 - Rational explanation?
- Inflation during the Reagan Administration, Saddam Hussein and September 11th, . . .

Chicken or Egg?

policy positions / ideology → PID

OR

group identities → PID → policy positions / ideology

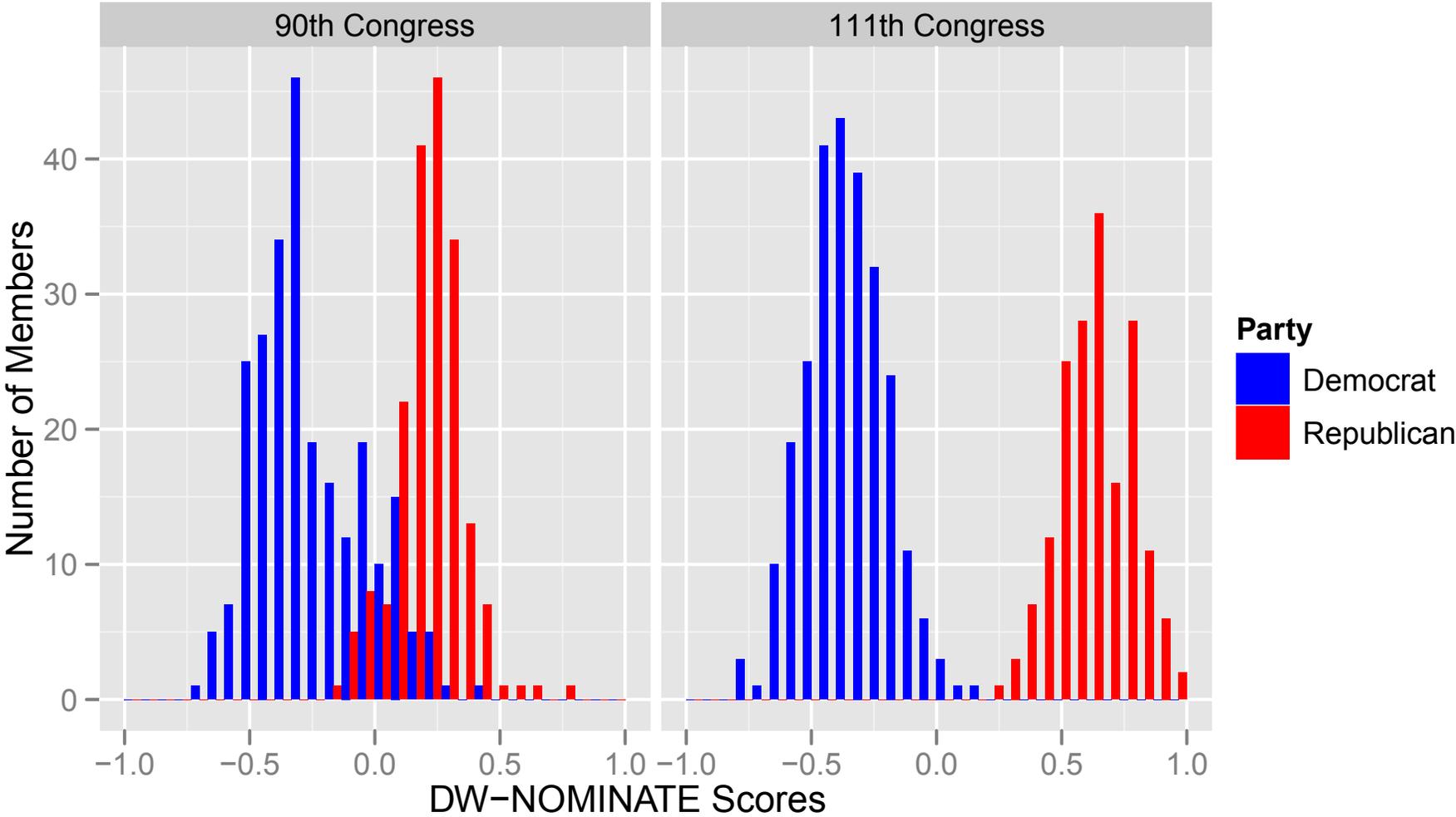
Partisan Realignment

How and why do partisan identities change?

- Partisan politicians and voters are both resistant to change, for different reasons
- Activists and interest groups push for change, either from within party or from without
 - (Northern) Democrats and civil rights
 - Republicans and Abortion
- Changes in groups associated with parties → (slow) change in voters' PID (concentrated among young)

Elite-Level Polarization

Growing polarization of partisan elites (office holders, activists)



Mass-Level Sorting

- Unlike elites, most voters are moderates, and they have **not** become more extreme.
- Still, the average ideological distance between Democrats and Republicans has increased. How is this possible?
- **Sorting**

Macro-level Consequences of Parties

- Structures political conflict (simplifying but also limiting)
- Defines political “equilibrium” (cf. Mayhew)
- Dampens political volatility

Normative Considerations

- Democracy “unthinkable” without parties
- But parties represent extremes, not necessarily the public

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