

# **Partisan Polarization in U.S. Politics**

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## Introduction

Partisan polarization, one of most important political dynamics of our times

Partisans = Democrats and Republicans (excluding independents, third party identifiers)

Partisan polarization = **divisions** between Democrats and Republicans (it takes two to polarize!)

Today will focus on

- polarization among politicians and voters, today and in comparison with past and other countries
- why it has emerged
- what are its consequences
- how it might be decreased

## Polarized Politicians

### Federal Courts: life-time appointments

- Judges/justices selected more along party and ideological lines
- Partisan divisions over confirmations more frequent
- Supreme Court clerks increasingly partisan/ideological

### U.S. Congress: deeply divided along partisan lines

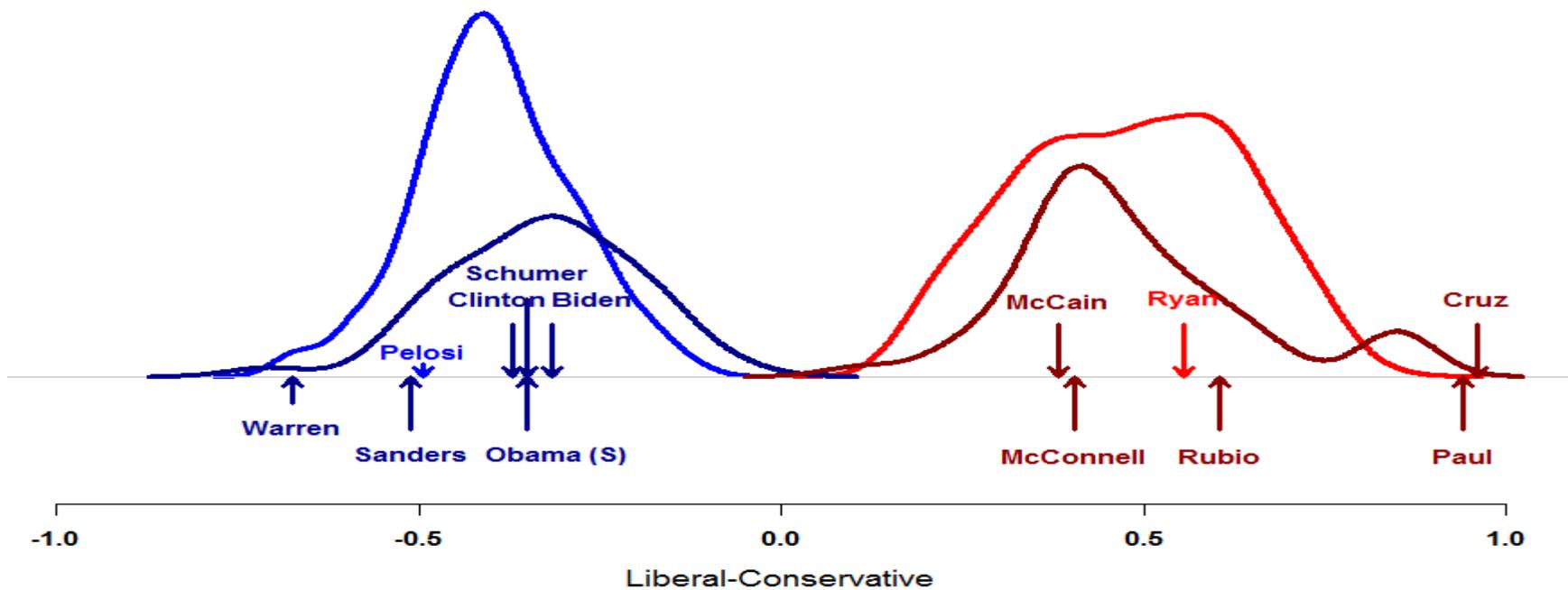
- Procedurally: majority party controls voting agenda in Senate and especially House
- Roll call votes good measure of polarization
  - In 2015-16 roll calls, Republicans to right, Democrats to left, no one in middle (Figure 1, with earlier Senate votes of Clinton, Obama, Biden added)
  - In 2017-18, congressional polarization continued:
    - ❑ Tax reform: House, 227 R's vs. 192 D's + 12 R's; Senate, 51 R's vs. 48 D's
    - ❑ ACA (ObamaCare) repeal: House, 217 R's vs. 193 D's + 20 R's; Senate, 49 R's vs. 48 D's + 3 R's

State legislatures: as polarized as Congress, though mostly one party controlled

# Figure 1

## Partisan Divisions in Roll Call Voting, 2015-16 Congress

House D=blue, Senate D=dark blue, House R=red, Senate R=dark red  
(source: Poole, [voteview.com/blog](http://voteview.com/blog), 12/18/16)



## Increased Party Polarization in Congress: 1879 to present

### Party ideological polarization

- Most roll call votes have fallen along a single liberal-conservative continuum since 1879, increasingly in recent years
- Partisan polarization = difference between parties in voting on liberal vs. conservative issues

### Congressional partisan polarization, 1879-2016, measured along left-right ideological dimension on roll calls (Figure 2)

- 2016 highest for House and almost highest for Senate in its entire history
- House and Senate polarization go up and down in tandem (correlation = .92)
- Recent rise in polarization mainly result of increasing Republican conservatism

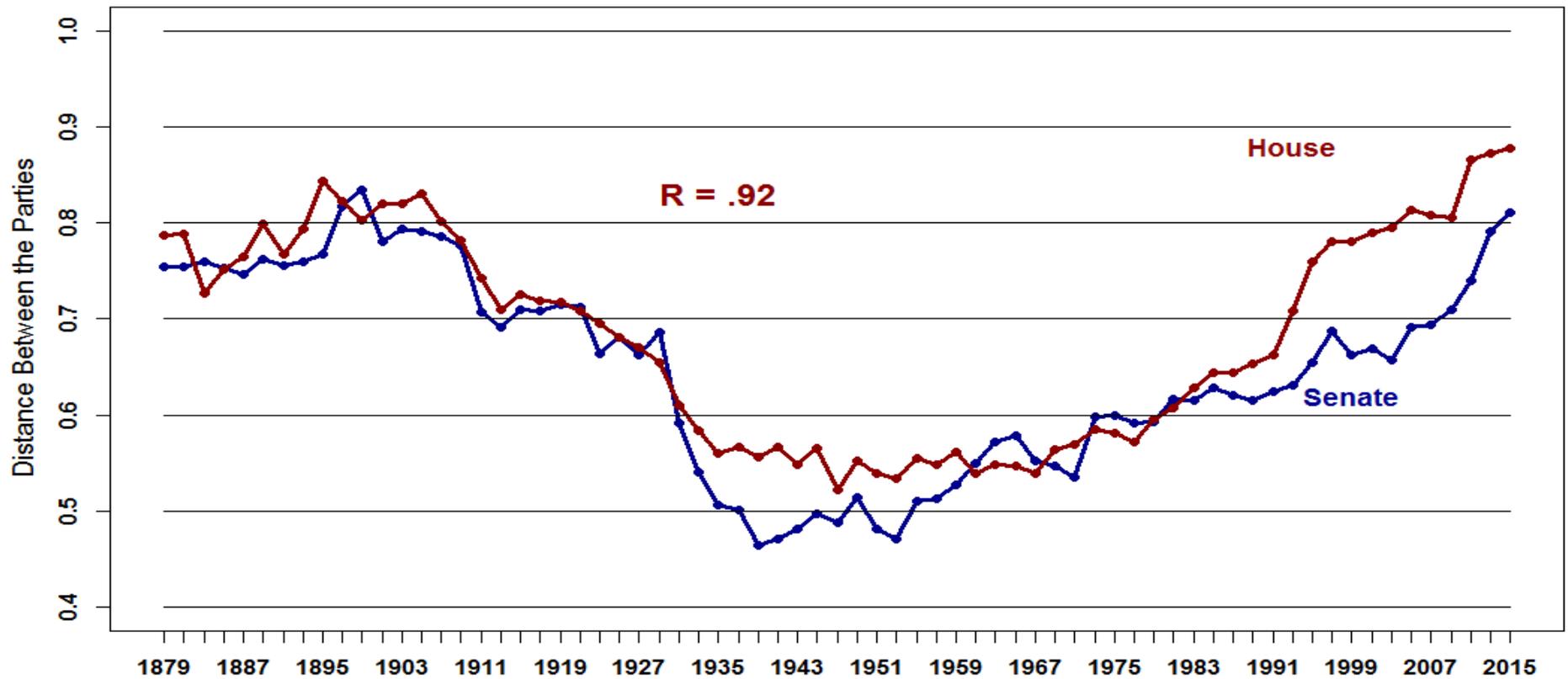
Crossover voting (= % who vote with members of opposing party on liberal vs. conservative issues) high in 3 decades after WWII, rare since

Party polarization in voting has continued in 2017-18: e.g., tax reform, Obamacare repeal, confirmations of nominees

Figure 2

# Partisan Divisions Deeper than Before in Congressional Roll Call Votes, 1879-2016

(source: Poole, [voteview.com/blog](http://voteview.com/blog), 12/18/16)



## Weapons of Partisan Polarization Beyond Roll Call Votes

### Congressional agenda control:

- Hastert rule: bills do not go to floor if majority of House GOP opposes
- Senate Majority Leader fails to bring divisive votes for his party to floor

### Senate filibusters: any Senator can object to having floor vote; 60 Senators have to vote for **cloture** to move to a vote:

- Use by minority party has increased since early 1970s, especially post-1995
- “Nuclear option,” approved by Democratic majority for lower federal courts and executive positions in 2013, then for Supreme Court by Republican majority in 2017:
  - Only majority now required for cloture on all presidential nominations
  - Reconciliation (budget) bills cannot be filibustered: e.g., ACA repeal
  - Regular legislation can be filibustered
  - Cloture rule can be changed by majority vote

### Campaign combat tactics, position taking rather than policy making:

- “Gotcha” votes: Gingrich strategy, first adopted in mid-1980s
- Symbolic positioning for policy distinctiveness

### Heightened use of parliamentary tactics to delay confirmation of presidential nominees

## Sources of Greater Polarization among Politicians

### 1. “Selection bias”

- Heightened relationship between ideology and party, with demise of Democratic South
- More safe Republican and Democratic seats due to gerrymandering and population shifts
  - → more ideologically extreme representatives selected via primaries
  - Tea party Freedom Caucus in House, using Hastert rule, pushes Republicans to right
- Moderates less inclined to seek/retain congressional positions

### 2. Demise of powerful independent committee positions, allocated by party loyalty + term limited

### 3. Heightened external pressures

- Increased negative campaigning, fueled by outside groups
- Growing influence of campaign contributions, especially from ideologically-driven groups/individuals
- Unprecedented interest group and activist pressures to punish defections

### 4. Decreased inter-party social “bonding” among members

## Polarized Voters

### Partisanship among Americans

- About 40% of Americans neither Democrats nor Republicans, and are not polarized
- Remaining 60% of partisans slightly more Democratic than Republican
- Partisans more likely to vote, especially in non-presidential elections

### Democrats and Republicans deeply divided in voting and views of political world

- Partisans divided in preferences on policy issues, though less than might be expected
- Partisanship as “tribalism”: support for their side no matter what
  - Voter support follows their party’s leadership, including on issues
  - Partisans divided in support for party leaders
    - ❑ 2016 election: 89% D’s voted for Clinton, 88% R’s for Trump
    - ❑ Sharply disagree in approval of Trump job (Gallup, 5/21-27/18): 85% Republicans vs. 8% Democrats approve
    - ❑ Sharply disagree in perceptions of Trump as “moral leader”: 22%/55% of Republicans see him as very/somewhat strong moral leader versus 2%/5% of Democrats
- **Partisan motivated reasoning** = partisans see world thru’ partisan lenses, with their political preferences “coloring” their perceptions of reality, including facts

## Greater Partisan Polarization among Voters than Ever?

Partisan polarization higher today than in history of polling

- Growing polarization in presidential approval since 1950s (Figure 3)
- Growing polarization in evaluations of party's presidential nominees (Figure 4)
- Possibly higher at times in 19<sup>th</sup> century, probably not in lead up to Civil War but perhaps in post-war period?

Americans more polarized over major party nominees than in other countries in democratic world (Figure 5)

**Figure 3**  
**Presidential Averages in Approval by Party Identification, 1953-2018**

Source: Gallup Poll

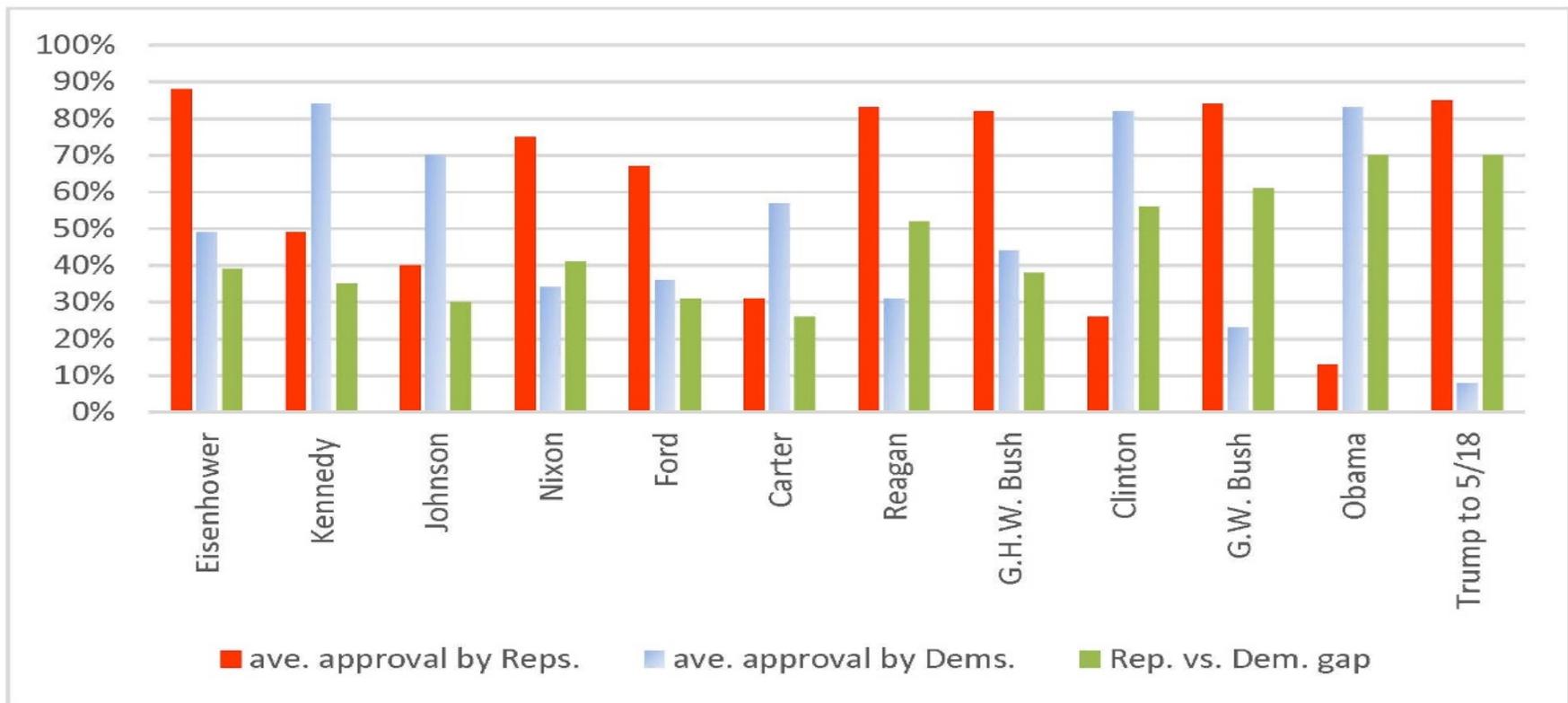
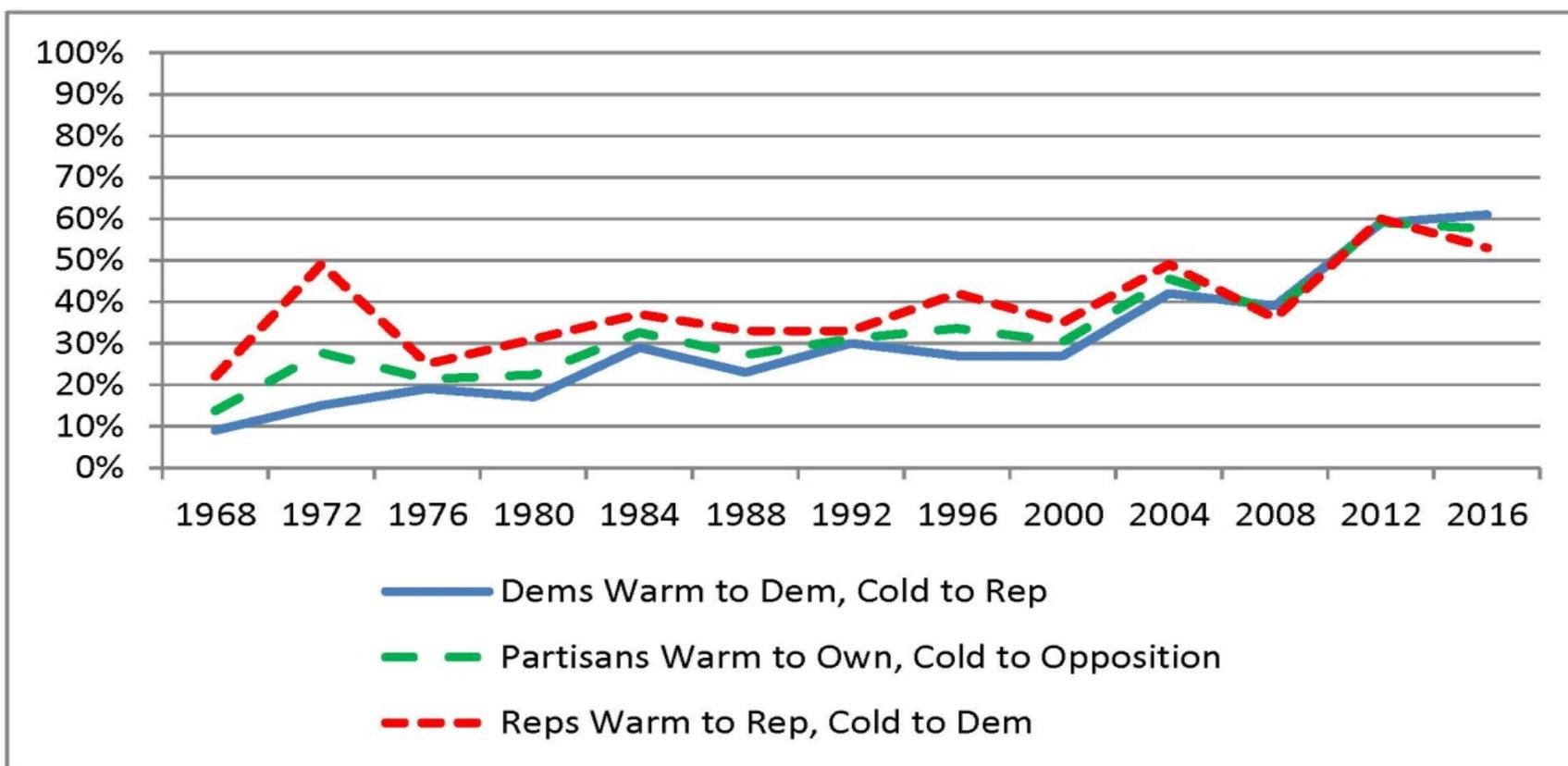


Figure 4  
Partisans Increasingly Divided (0-30 vs. 70-100) in Evaluations of Opposing  
Presidential Candidates

(source: American National Election Study Surveys)

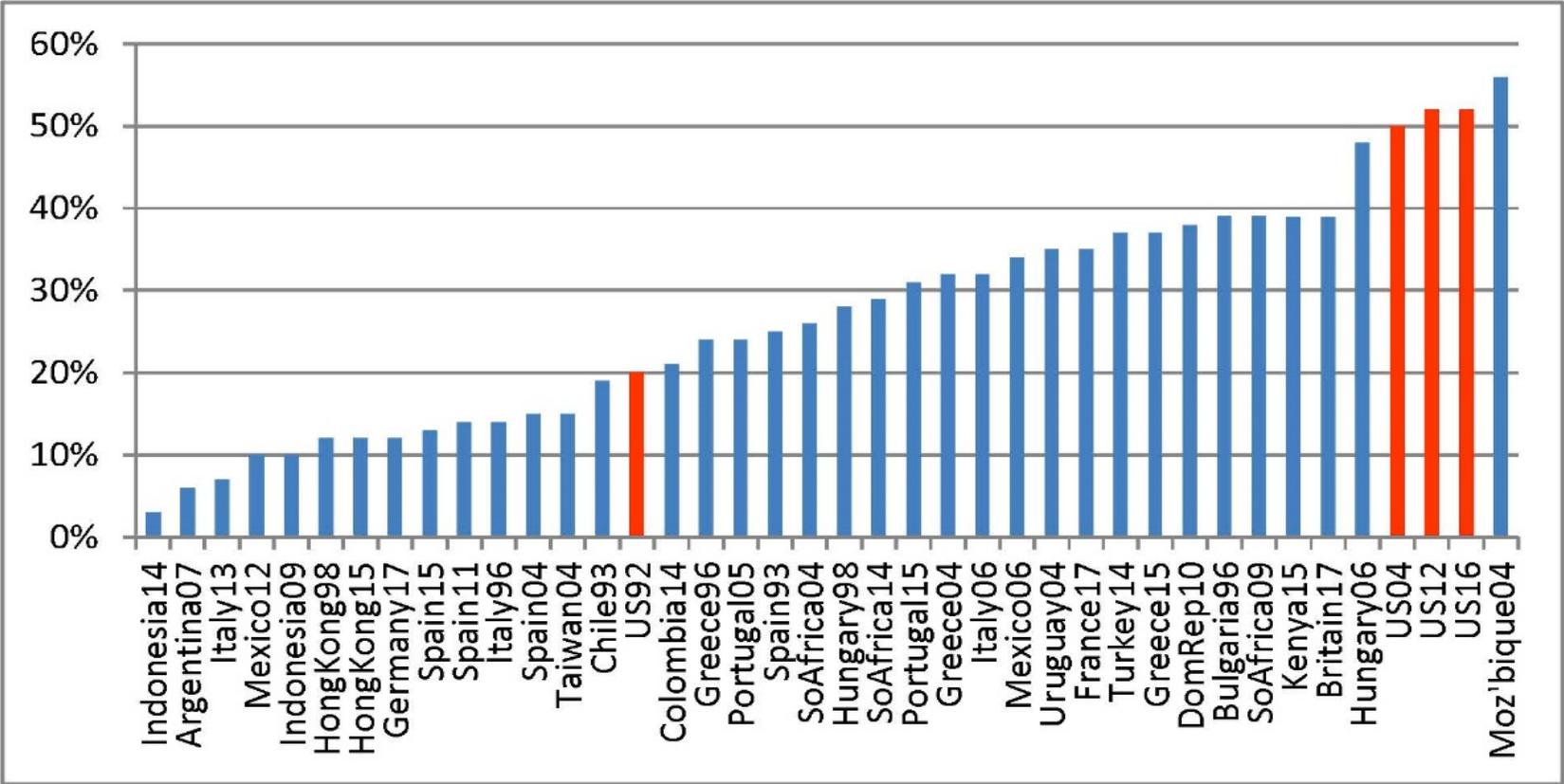


# Figure 5

## Polarized Evaluations of Party Leaders

(Absolute difference > 7 between rating of government party leader and opposition party leader on 0-10 scales)

Source: Comparative National Election Project surveys, 1992-2017



## Why Are Partisan Voters So Polarized?

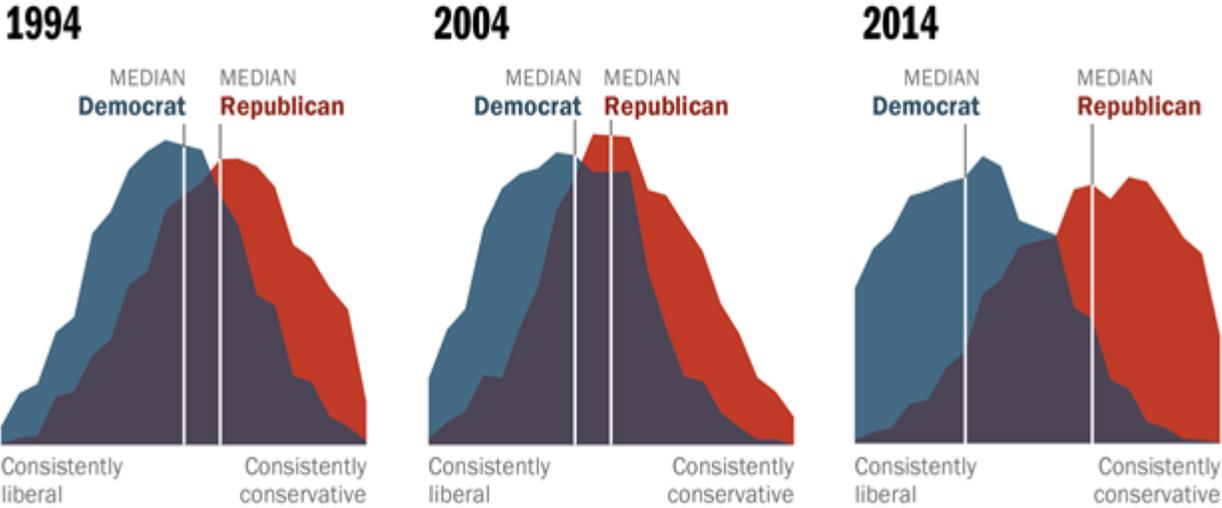
1. Party identifications and issue positions increasingly reinforcing (Figure 6)
  - Realignment in South, where conservatives change to Republicans
  - Rise of harder-to-compromise issues: religious values, no-tax positions, racial issues
2. Political discourse more partisan and polarized
  - Pressure from growing number of ideological interest groups
  - Increased “toxicity” of campaigning (negative, personalistic attacks), especially by independent groups → harder to see opposition positively
  - Increased partisan “spin” and “fake news”
4. *Echo Chamber*: partisans more inclined to seek **and find** reinforcing sources of political information
  - Media: more sources available for partisan/ideological information and partisans turning more to them
  - Discussants: partisans more inclined to have like-minded friends (Figure 7)
5. Parties nominate more extreme candidates in primaries, forcing voters to choose between extremes
6. “**Tribalism**”: voters follow leaders into more partisan stances: e.g., greater partisan divide on abortion, foreign policy; even reversal of positions when leaders change (Figure 8)

# Figure 6

## Democrats and Republicans Increasingly Ideologically Divided on Issues

Source: Pew Surveys

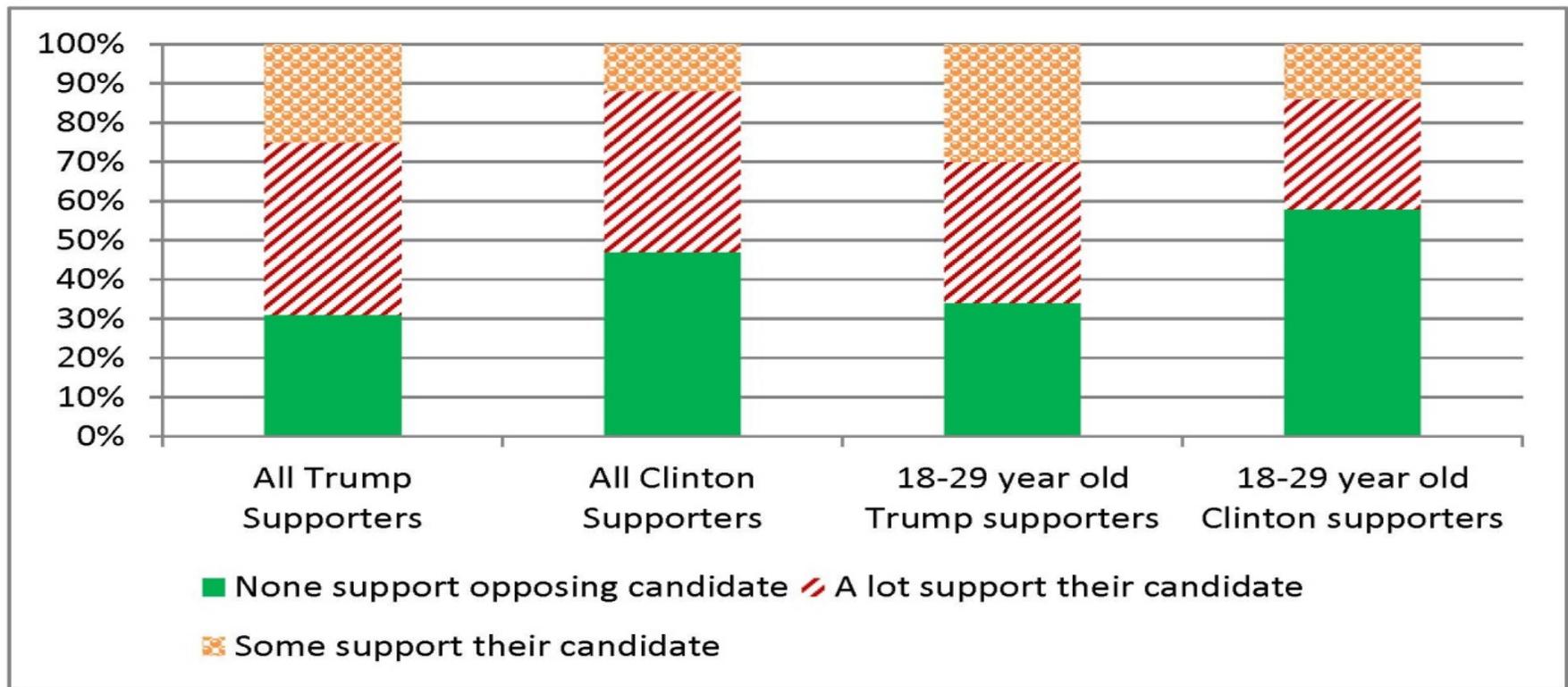
*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values*



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

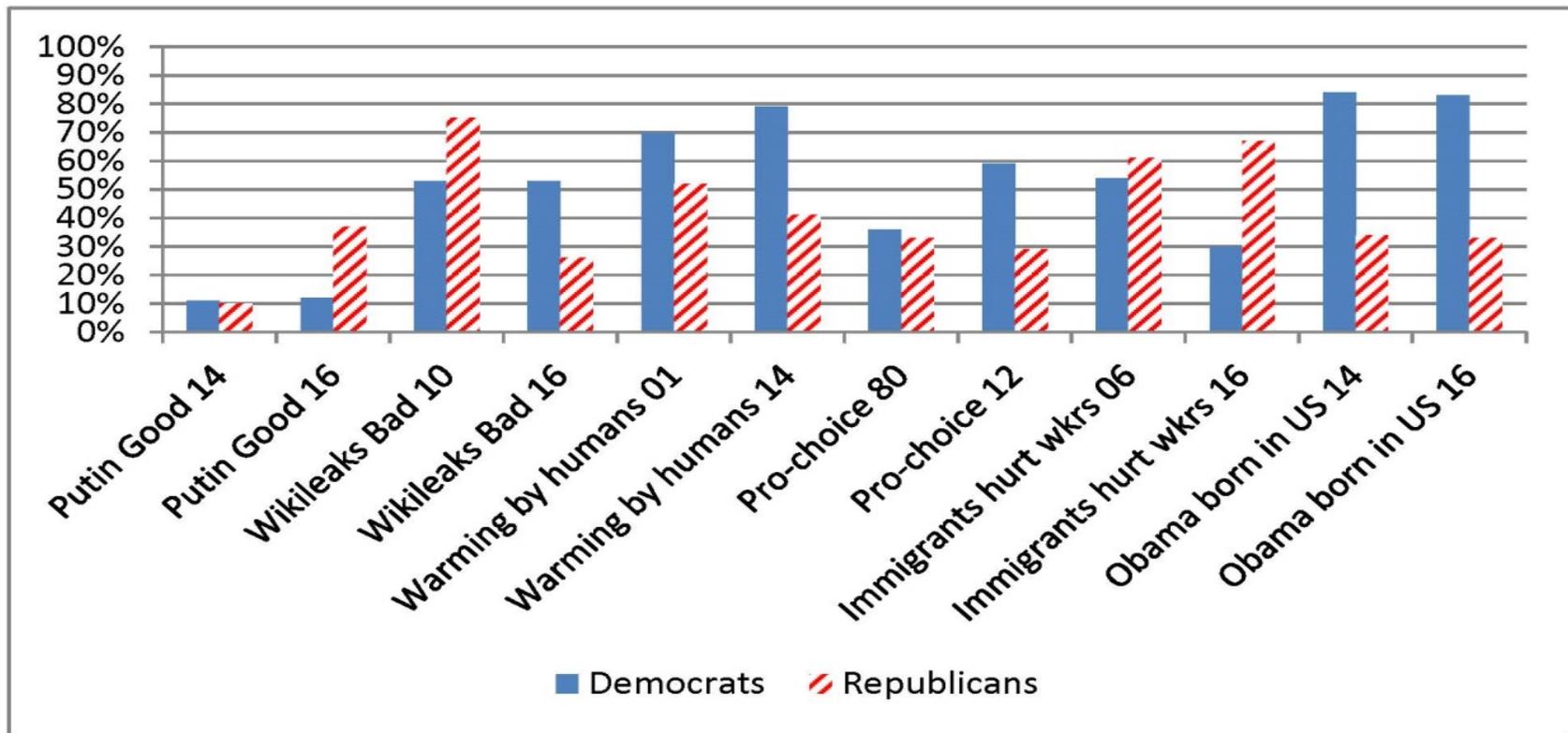
Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

Figure 7  
**Close Friendships Re-enforce Polarization**  
 Source: Pew Research Center survey of registered voters, June 7 to July 5, 2016



## Figure 8 Change in Partisan Issue Positions

Sources: Gallup (warming), Pew (immigration), ANES (abortion), YouGov (other) Polls  
 Note: Good/Bad = Favorable/unfavorable views)



## What Are Consequences of Increased Partisan Polarization?

### Benefits:

- Party differences easier to identify → more issue-based voting and accountability
- Politics matters more → higher turnout and political involvement – **among partisans**

### Costs:

- For governance and policy-making:
  - Hard for opposite sides to agree on common policies → more difficult for representative institutions to address problems, which require bipartisan solutions
  - Change in party control of government → sharp changes in policy
  - Disagreement on facts makes agreement on solutions difficult
- For democracy:
  - Shrillness of partisan debate → more disaffected voters → greater distrust in government and other institutions
  - Parties and politicians increasingly seen in negative terms → less ability of them to be credible leaders
- Leads to rise of anti-establishment “outsiders”, who are speaking to voters’ dissatisfaction with mainstream leaders

Costs > Benefits

## Conclusion: What Can Be Done?

### Partisan polarization will subside when/if:

- Voters:
  - are less tribal, less engaged in motivated reasoning
  - punish extremists in primaries and general elections
  - punish governing parties that emphasize winning over governing
  - are better able to distinguish “fake” from real news
- Leaders:
  - Opposing parties prioritize issues on which they agree (e.g., FY19 budget, debt ceiling, Russia sanctions, infrastructure, immigration reform, protection of political norms)
  - Politicians’ rhetoric is more civil, less vituperative
  - Presidents reach across party lines to fulfill campaign promises

### Would political reforms help?

- Redistricting to decrease number of gerrymandered districts and “safe” seats
- Top two primaries? less selection of extreme candidates?
- Reduced role of money in campaigns, especially “dark money”

**Voters and their choices among candidates are the key**