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**THE IDEOLOGICAL RIGHT vs. THE GROUP BENEFITS LEFT:
ASYMMETRIC POLITICS IN AMERICA**

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Abstract:

Scholars commonly assume that the American left and right are configured as mirror images to each other, but in fact the two sides exhibit important and underappreciated differences. We argue that the Republican Party is the agent of an ideological movement, while the Democratic Party is best understood as a coalition of social groups. Left-leaning consistencies primarily seek concrete government action from their allies in office, while right-of-center activists instead prize doctrinal purity. Because the American electorate is symbolically conservative and operationally liberal, both sides find support in the views of the mass public for their preferred way of thinking about politics, but both also face important and distinct challenges in governing effectively.

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Introduction

Is political conflict in the United States a competition between two equivalent ideological or partisan sides arranged in an inverse manner to each other? Scholars commonly build theories of political parties, legislative politics, interest groups, and voting behavior that are intended to apply equally well to liberals and conservatives, or to Democrats and Republicans. We argue, however, that the two sides perceive politics differently and behave asymmetrically. The right is built on ideological commitment; the left is built on the policy demands of constituency groups. Their distinct governing styles reflect these consistent underlying differences. At both the mass and elite levels, Democrats think and act very differently from Republicans, in ways that have important implications for the American political system.

Right-of-center politics in the contemporary U.S. is dominated by a self-identified conservative movement whose members are united by a devotion to the principles of small government and cultural traditionalism. Over the past few decades, this movement has become by far the most powerful political force within the modern Republican Party. Conservatives (1) harbor an innate skepticism about—or hostility to—the use of government action to address most domestic policy issues or social problems, (2) tend to evaluate public policies on the basis of ideological congeniality rather than legislative outcomes, and (3) face an ongoing internal tension between doctrinal purity and the inevitable concessions or failures inherent in governing—a conflict that is exacerbated by the presence within the Republican Party of an influential cadre of movement leaders devoted to publicly policing ideological orthodoxy.

The American left, in contrast, is less an ideologically unified movement than a looser coalition of social groups whose interests are served by government activity of one form or another

and who have found a political home under the big tent of the Democratic Party. Because these groups are primarily motivated to engage in party politics in order to make concrete programmatic demands on behalf of their members, left-leaning officeholders, activists, and voters are more likely than conservatives to take a close interest in the substantive details of the legislative process and are more willing than their counterparts on the right to compromise in order to win partial achievement of their policy goals if the alternative is simply inaction. Each set of constituents on the left focuses its attention on its own specific issue domains and policies of interest. Without a common ideological doctrine from which specific policy positions can be easily derived, left-of-center leaders face a greater challenge in maintaining unity and meeting the multiple substantive goals of coalition members. Democratic politicians are attentive to group interests in each issue area but, unlike the contemporary right, American liberals lack a powerful self-defined ideological movement designed to impose philosophical orthodoxy on elected officials across a broad range of issues.

We argue that these key differences—(1) conservatives are united by ideological goals whereas liberals are more divided by specific issue concerns; (2) the left, more than the right, is composed of a coalition of self-conscious social groups, with each group pressuring officeholders on behalf of its own set of policy priorities; and (3) liberals primarily value concrete and comprehensive government action, even if it requires substantial compromise in order to be realized, while conservatives often prize symbolic measures or the obstruction of government activity—are broadly applicable to the contemporary American political system. These differences extend from party officeholders and activists downward into the less attentive mass public. Indeed, much of this asymmetry could plausibly represent the product of self-interested behavior by vote-seeking political elites. Republican politicians appeal to voters both within and outside their loyal electoral base by emphasizing broad themes of limited government that are enduringly popular among American voters. At the same time, Democratic candidates seek to benefit from the national electorate's

relative operational liberalism, presenting themselves as proponents and defenders of specific initiatives that both advance the interests of an element of their party's electoral coalition and also provide tangible benefits to a significant proportion of citizens across the ideological spectrum.

A majority of the American public simultaneously endorses liberal positions on most specific policy issues while favoring conservative views on more general questions concerning the proper size and role of government. Elected Republicans and activists on the right benefit from, and encourage, the public's endorsement of conservative values in the abstract while Democrats and liberals take advantage of, and help to promote, the public's relatively left-leaning attitudes on specific policy issues. Liberals and conservatives also assess government and politicians differently: liberals seek repeated action on a set of issue priorities while conservatives expect a shift in the ideological direction of public policy. Because most of the public agrees with each side on its own terms, liberals and conservatives can each claim to represent the views of an electoral majority.

Once the voters grant them political power, Democratic and Republican officeholders exhibit contrasting styles of governing as they seek to balance the demands of their partisan base with the necessity of appealing to the wider electorate. For Democrats, the most serious impediments to success in office tend to be the difficulties inherent in managing a diverse social coalition comprised of discrete elements with specific policy objectives, combined with the danger that their proposals for the concrete expansion of federal activity to benefit a particular constituent group or groups may provoke opposition from a mass public that remains opposed to "big government" in the abstract. Republicans, meanwhile, face their own set of challenges. The party's politicians must attempt to placate a relatively unified, vociferous, and increasingly powerful conservative movement that constantly exerts pressure on them to demonstrate ideological fealty, yet concrete attempts to move public policy in a rightward direction risk alienating an American electorate that remains supportive of government activism in most specific cases.

To assess our claims, we analyze a variety of empirical evidence to substantiate the fundamental asymmetry of the American left and right. We begin by examining this phenomenon among the mass public, finding that citizens are attracted to the Republican Party due to shared ideological affinity and to the Democrats on the basis of specific policy positions and social group identity. This distinction endures as we move from party identifiers in the electorate through the activist and donor classes to party leaders and elected officials. We then consider the implications of this difference for the governing style of the two parties, focusing on the contemporary Congress.

Public Opinion: Specifically Liberal and Generally Conservative

Both liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans habitually claim to represent the true American popular majority—and there is evidence to support both sides’ assertions. Table 1 provides an overview of the liberal or conservative direction of public opinion in both individual issue areas and broader ideological attitudes. We report the average percent of liberal responses on public opinion questions (out of all non-centrist responses) given to pollsters each year since 1981; figures below 50 percent represent a conservative majority and above 50 percent correspond to a liberal majority. Liberal responses are more common than conservative responses, and sometimes substantially so, on nearly all domestic policy issues, even those—such as crime or welfare—sometimes thought to be “owned” by the Republican Party. Yet conservative responses predominate when citizens are asked about their ideological self-identification or their attitudes about the general power or size of government. Depending on the scope of the questions asked, this summary of American public opinion reveals both a center-right and a center-left nation. The public is decidedly pro-conservative when asked general questions but leans left on specific policy items.

[Insert Table 1]

Table 2 summarizes how these seemingly contradictory opinions within the mass public reveal a gap between symbolic and operational ideology. We use the measures of these distinct forms of ideological orientation created by Christopher Ellis and James Stimson using data collected by the General Social Survey. Ellis and Stimson define operational liberals (or conservatives) as those respondents who give mostly liberal (or conservative) responses to specific policy questions, while symbolic liberals and conservatives are those who explicitly self-identify as such. As Table 2 reveals, operational liberals substantially outnumber operational conservatives in the American electorate, yet they are just as likely to identify as symbolic conservatives than as symbolic liberals. Ellis and Stimson interpret these results as demonstrating that American voters are confused about ideological terminology or tend to associate the word “conservative” with a non-political meaning. But their findings are also consistent with the hypothesis that conservatism, in the abstract, is more appealing to voters than is liberalism, even as specific liberal issue positions remain more popular than specific conservative positions. As a result, right-of-center elites are on firmer ground in the public’s mind, even among their own supporters, when they emphasize general ideological views rather than specific policy issues.

[Insert Table 2]

Ideologues vs. Groups

When asked why they support their party or its candidates, Democrats and Republicans provide very different rationales. For more than six decades, the American National Election Studies (ANES) have asked a sample of Americans what they like and dislike about each major party and presidential candidate in every presidential election, recording and coding their open-ended

responses. Political scientists have traditionally used these items to assess citizens' "level of conceptualization" (following Converse 1964), defining those respondents whose views of particular issues and candidates seemed to reflect a larger abstract or philosophical orientation to politics as "ideologues" and those respondents who instead cited group identity or interests as "group benefits" voters. For example, respondents who mentioned the growth of government and the passage of the Affordable Care Act under the Obama Administration as the decisive factor determining their vote in the 2012 presidential election would be categorized as ideologues, while respondents who instead justified their vote choice by characterizing Mitt Romney as the candidate of the wealthy would be classified as voting on the basis of group benefits. The other categories—"nature of the times" for those who credit or blame one of the parties or candidates for the overall direction of the nation and "no issue content" for those who mention personality traits or other non-substantive considerations—are employed for citizens whose political orientations are not based on the ideological alignments or social group coalitions of the parties.

Although scholars from Converse forward have treated these classifications as constituting a hierarchical scale of political sophistication with ideologues at the top, there is good reason to believe that the "ideological" and "group benefits" categories are better viewed as types—rather than levels—of conceptualization. The relative prevalence of each type within the two parties is remarkably distinct, as revealed by Figure 1. In 2000, the most recent study used by scholars to systematically code respondents' partisan likes and dislikes in order to identify their type of political conceptualization, the proportion of respondents categorized as ideologues is much higher among Republicans, especially those who strongly identify with the party, than among Democrats or Independents. The proportion of respondents categorized as group-oriented voters is even more strongly associated in a linear fashion with the 7-point party identification scale. More than half of

strong Democrats justified their views of the parties and candidates in terms of group benefits, but just over 10% of strong Republicans did so.

[Insert Figure 1]

This finding is not a product of the particular context of the 2000 election. Figure 2 plots the relative ideological and group-based orientation of strong Democrats and strong Republicans over the 1964–2000 period. In every election for which data are available, strong Democratic respondents were much more likely to cite group benefits than ideological considerations, with ratios ranging from 2-1 (in 1964) to more than 6-1 (in 1988). Republicans were always much more likely to be categorized as ideologues, also by a healthy margin in each election. There were always some partisans—and many more independents—in every election whose political conceptualization fell within neither category. Yet the relative ideological orientation of Republicans and relative group-based conceptualization of Democrats remained constant across forty years of electoral history.

[Insert Figure 2]

This difference is not a product of how scholars coded respondents' answers. Table 3 presents the raw data from the likes and dislikes responses in 2000 and 2004. More than five times as many comments mentioning groups were made in favor of Democrats or against Republicans as the reverse. At least in these two elections, more of the comments favorable to Republicans mentioned candidate personal attributes, but the difference was not as stark.

[Insert Table 3]

Scholars often view ideologically sophisticated citizens as those who are most likely to vote on the basis of policy considerations, but the concentration of ideologically-minded voters among Republicans does not necessarily imply that Republican identifiers are more concerned with the substance of policy than are Democrats. In fact, as Table 3 demonstrates, domestic public policy issues were cited more often in support of Democratic presidential candidates than Republican candidates. Instead, party identifiers differ in the reasoning behind their interest in policy: Democrats tend to explain their favored positions by citing the social groups that would be helped or hurt by policies, while Republicans justify theirs with reference to more general attitudes toward government.

It has been a truism of American politics since the New Deal era that the Democratic Party serves as the chief political vehicle by which discrete social minorities exert democratic pressure on the government to protect or advance their particular interests (often, the amelioration of perceived disadvantage or oppression). In contrast, Republicans have been the preferred party of populous voting blocs within the electorate who tend to view themselves less as particular self-conscious groups in the political arena than as constituting the default or mainstream American mass public of whom *other* groups make demands. While political issues and identities have evolved considerably since the 1930s, it is worth noting the continuity in the general character of the two parties' popular coalitions, as summarized in Table 4. Republican presidential candidates tend to attract electoral support from social majorities or pluralities such as white voters, Protestants, suburbanites, married voters, and so forth. In contrast, the Democratic Party remains, to a large degree, a "rainbow coalition" of racial, religious, economic, and sexual minorities, who compensate for their smaller relative numbers by voting for Democratic candidates in lopsided proportions. Many of these voters

decline to self-identify as liberals, but their party loyalty is not necessarily weaker for having its roots in social identity rather than ideology.

[Insert Table 4]

Distinct Electorates, Activists, and Parties

The difference between Republicans and Democrats with respect to the relative prevalence of ideological and group-based political orientations is visible across voters, activists, and donors, but is most pronounced among the more active segments of each side's constituency. One foundational difference is that the Republican Party is dominated by self-identified conservatives whereas the Democratic Party contains a much more varied ideological spectrum. Using the 2012 ANES, Figure 3 reports the distribution of ideology among all Democratic and Republican identifiers (black lines), among the subset of each constituency that reported engaging in two or more activities in support of a candidate (gray lines), and among those who reported giving money to the party (marble lines). Among Republicans, 74% of voters, 84% of activists, and 88% of donors classified themselves as conservatives; almost none identified as liberals. Among Democrats, only 41% of voters, 56% of activists, and 64% of donors identified as liberal; 13% of Democratic voters and activists self-identified as a form of conservative. Republicans are ideologically unified; Democrats are ideologically mixed.

[Insert Figure 3]

In Table 5, we use several other questions available on the 2012 ANES to demonstrate the points of asymmetry between Democrats and Republicans. Respondents were asked which party is

best for the interests of women, with “neither party” also offered as a response option. One might expect that such a question would merely provide an opportunity for voters on both sides to claim the superiority of their own party. But while Democrats, especially those who engage in campaign activities, overwhelmingly agreed that their party better served women’s interests, Republicans were surprisingly reluctant to make similar assertions on behalf of the GOP. Fewer than half of Republican activists and only one-third of identifiers named the Republican Party as better for the interests of women, suggesting that they are not particularly oriented toward group interests or perceive them as particularly important—even in a context in which asserting group-based representation could simply serve as a costless act of partisan cheerleading.

[Insert Table 5]

Respondents were also asked two general questions about the size and scope of government: (1) whether government was large because it interferes with private decisions or because it addresses social problems, and (2) whether government should provide more services or fewer services. Republicans, especially activists, chose the ideologically conservative response to both questions by wide margins. Democrats were less likely to give consistently liberal answers, although the proportion rose substantially among Democratic activists. The conservative consistency on broad ideological predispositions, however, did not extend to survey items concerning specific policy questions. More than 70% of Democrats supported increased spending on social programs in a majority of seven different areas, but only 35% of Republicans favored cutting a majority of social spending categories. Once again, the data reveal greater Republican unity—and an overall conservative advantage in the electorate—on the subject of ideology broadly conceived, whereas

Democrats are more unified—and represent a broader majority—on social group identification and specific policies.

Democratic and Republican donors share these predispositions. Table 6 summarizes attitudes expressed by campaign donors (of at least \$200 during the 1990s) in each party. As measured by feeling thermometers, Republican donors express very positive evaluations of conservatives and very negative evaluations of liberals; Democrats have the reverse view, of course, but do not hold it as strongly in either case. Democratic donors feel more positive than Republican donors about the interest groups affiliated with their party, though both express negative evaluations of the groups associated with the opposition party. In choosing which candidates to support with their contributions, Republican donors are more likely to say that (conservative) ideology is always important; they are also much more likely to agree that donors are motivated by ideological goals. Democratic donors are more likely to view a group's endorsement as critical and slightly more likely to view influencing policy as important.

[Insert Table 6]

The difference in focus between the left and the right is also apparent among columnists in the nation's major opinion journals and newspapers. Using data from a content analysis of liberal and conservative opinion columns (Noel 2013), Table 7 reports the percent of columns dedicated to general discussion of political ideology and specific domestic policy issues by writers on each ideological side (in the two most recent years of the data). Conservatives focused more than three times as many columns on political ideology as liberals in 1970 and seven times as many in 1990. There was no consistent difference in the percent of columns dedicated to domestic policy issues,

but there was a large difference in whether those columns identified specific policies that they supported: liberal columnists supported about three times as many proposals.

[Insert Table 7]

Even the official adopted platforms of the national parties reflect this perennial partisan asymmetry. Figure 4 illustrates the average share of each party's platform that was dedicated to general ideological rhetoric, references to particular social group constituencies, and discussion of particular public policies. We present averages of all platforms since 1920 and just those since 1980, but the differences across eras are less significant than one might expect from the conventional wisdom that the strongly ideological, small-government ethos within the Republican Party arose suddenly along with the nomination of Ronald Reagan. Republicans typically spent 50% more of their platform discussing the size and scope of government, while Democrats allocated 25% more space to laying out specific policy positions. The one major change since 1980 is that both parties devote less platform text to courting specific social group constituencies, but group appeals in the Democratic platform are still, on average, 24% longer than those produced by the GOP.

[Insert Figure 4]

Asymmetry In Governing

The distinct elements and goals of the American left and right in the mass electorate and within the activist and donor classes have visible effects on the behavior of the two parties in government. For Democratic officeholders, the demands of their partisan constituencies encourage them to focus on delivering concrete policy change, though this task can be complicated by the lack

of a strong ideological consensus within the party and the prevalence of public skepticism over initiatives easily characterized by conservative critics as “big-government” or “tax-and-spend” schemes. Republicans enjoy the advantage of relative philosophical unity, but intense and increasing pressure from the party base to engage in frequent demonstrations of fidelity to movement conservatism risks exposing the GOP’s vulnerability to alienating an operationally liberal national electorate. These differences are easily identifiable when examining the contemporary Congress.

The steady ideological polarization of the two parties in both the House and the Senate since the 1970s has become one of the most widely acknowledged trends in congressional politics. In addition, a growing number of scholars have noted that this polarization is itself asymmetric—by most measures, congressional Democrats have collectively moved only modestly to the left (due principally to the decline in relative size of the party’s southern wing) while Republicans in both chambers have turned decisively to the right, a trend that especially accelerated after 1994 (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006). While ideological moderates are scarcer than they once were in both parties, the moderate bloc within the GOP in particular has been rendered essentially extinct.

Perhaps surprisingly, Republican identifiers in the electorate have not responded to the strong rightward shift of their party over the past two decades with expressions of ideological satisfaction, nor do rank-and-file Democrats exhibit frustration with their own party leaders’ relative moderation. As Figure 5 demonstrates, most Republicans in the mass public consistently voice a desire for their party to become even more conservative, while a majority of Democrats prefer a more moderate Democratic Party; this difference predates the Obama presidency. These data suggest that the asymmetric polarization visible in the contemporary Congress reflects the unequal pressure placed on officeholders by their respective party bases.

[Insert Figure 5]

Democratic and Republican identifiers also differ with respect to favored governing style, as revealed by Figure 6. Republicans consistently express more admiration for politicians who “stick to their principles,” while Democrats collectively favor those who “make compromises.” This discrepancy held even during the later George W. Bush presidential administration, when many liberal media figures openly favored confrontation with Bush and his partisan allies. Though Bush was personally quite unpopular with the opposition party in the electorate (his approval rating among Democrats was consistently in the single-digit range during his second term), Democratic respondents still expressed a preference for compromise in government—a tendency that has carried over to the Obama era. Republicans, in contrast, have remained consistent in their elevation of principle over pragmatism, regardless of whether their party is in or out of power in Washington.

[Insert Figure 6]

Criticism from media figures, interest group leaders, or financial donors that partisan officeholders have betrayed the ideological principles of their party via excessive compromise thus finds much more fertile ground on the right than the left. To be sure, some liberal activists grumbled during the George W. Bush presidency that Democrats in Congress had not sufficiently or effectively opposed Bush’s actions in office, especially on foreign policy, but no large-scale coordinated effort arose to cleanse the party ideologically, suggesting the limited appeal of this argument even within the Democratic base. Almost immediately upon the ascendancy of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2009, however, conservative activists mobilized under the banner of the Tea Party, a movement dedicated not only to opposing liberals such as Obama and then-speaker

Nancy Pelosi, but also to gaining influence over a Republican Party that many conservative activists viewed as insufficiently true to principle.

Over the past several years, this energized conservative base has had a significant impact on congressional politics, especially within the Republican conferences in the House and Senate. An increasingly well-funded set of national conservative organizations, including the Club for Growth, Heritage Action, the Madison Project, and the Senate Conservatives Fund, has emerged as a significant force in Republican primary elections, leading to the defeat of three sitting Republican senators for renomination in 2010 or 2012 as well as the nomination in open-seat races of outsider candidates such as Rand Paul of Kentucky and Ted Cruz of Texas over more experienced, business-oriented establishment Republicans. The willingness of primary voters to support Tea Party-backed candidates over more familiar politicians indicates the resonance of the purist conservative appeal within active Republican circles. Reflecting this view, Matt Kibbe, director of the conservative activist organization FreedomWorks, wrote in 2013 that he perceived “a hostile takeover happening within the Republican Party. The senior management of the GOP has failed its key shareholders, abandoning the founding vision of individual freedom, fiscal responsibility, and constitutionally limited government. What’s worse, those passing through the revolving door of rent seekers like things just the way they are. . . The GOP is freedom’s party, and we’re taking it back” (Kibbe 2013).

The growing strength of the mobilized conservative movement in Republican politics—a development with no true counterpart on the Democratic side—complicates Republican congressional leaders’ approach to governing. In both chambers, rebellious blocs of members have repeatedly frustrated the efforts of party leaders to unite behind legislation, especially in the case of budget agreements that require bipartisan cooperation. For example, House Speaker John Boehner negotiated a deficit reduction deal with the Obama administration in the summer of 2011 that was ultimately stymied by conservative resistance in the House; the subsequent bipartisan and bicameral

“supercommittee” charged with developing an alternate budget plan similarly failed to reach agreement due to Republican opposition.

From the perspective of many Republican officeholders, exacerbating confrontation with Democrats serves as an intentional strategy designed to inspire support (or relieve pressure) from an otherwise skeptical party base. In January 2013, a House Republican leadership aide told *Politico* that the party “may need a [government] shutdown just to get it out of their system. We might need to do that for member management purposes, so they have an endgame and can show their constituents they’re fighting” (Vandehei, Allen and Sherman 2013). The following October, a standoff with Obama and Senate Democrats forced by conservative purists over appropriations and the federal debt ceiling, led in large part by Cruz, indeed resulted in a 16-day partial government shutdown and came within days of triggering a default on federal debt repayments. Republican leaders ultimately relented, bringing a bill to the House floor that reopened the government and raised the debt ceiling without conditions after public opinion polls suggested that the party was sustaining political damage among the American electorate; even so, most House Republicans, fearful of retribution from the party’s ideological base, voted against the legislation, and it passed only due to strong Democratic support.

This was not the first time that the Republican House leadership had allowed a bill to pass over the opposition of most members of the majority party. Formerly a rare phenomenon in the House—the so-called “Hastert Rule,” named after one of Boehner’s predecessors as speaker, decreed that the floor should only be open to legislation supported by a majority of Republicans—this practice became more frequent during the Boehner speakership, suggesting that Republican officeholders perceived a tension between the demands of their partisan base and the requirements of effective governing. As a group, the House Republican Party did not wish to risk its standing with the general electorate by causing a default on the national debt, preventing federal disaster relief for

the victims of Hurricane Sandy, or blocking the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act; as individuals, however, many wished to oppose these measures in order to remain in the good graces of the conservative movement. Table 8 lists the “Hastert Rule” violations that have occurred in the House over the past two years, reflecting the challenge posed by the emergence of Tea-Party Republicanism to the political calculations of the party’s incumbent officeholders.

[Insert Table 8]

Despite a rhetorical commitment to achieving major changes in the size and role of the federal government, the Boehner-led House has been distinguished in practice by its unusual lack of legislative productivity. Only 561 bills passed the House during the 2011–2012 session of Congress—the lowest figure since the pre-World War II era—and just 217 passed in 2013. With Republican leaders signaling in March 2014 that no major legislative initiatives are likely to emerge before the end of the year, this trend is likely to continue. In general, congressional Republicans have devoted more time and energy to symbolic position-taking designed to assuage the party base—for example, holding more than 50 votes over the past three years to repeal all or part of the Affordable Care Act, the primary legislative target of the contemporary conservative movement—than to the details of policy-making, even if most prospective conservative legislation passed by the House would be destined to remain “message bills” with little chance of approval in the Democratic-controlled Senate. The modest legislative agenda of the contemporary House suggests that party leaders are wary of running afoul of the operational liberalism of the American public by making a large number of specific conservative policy proposals, while a more moderate approach would likely provoke opposition from the conservative base.

This modest legislative record contrasts strikingly with that of Boehner's Democratic predecessor, Nancy Pelosi, who served as speaker between 2007 and 2010. House Democrats pursued an ambitious programmatic agenda during this period, attempting to satisfy various party constituencies with favorable policies: an equal-pay bill for women, a raise in the minimum wage for labor unions, a climate change bill for environmentalists, repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy for gay rights groups, financial services regulation for consumer advocates, and so forth. The relative lack of ideological unity within the congressional Democratic Party often made passage challenging (some initiatives favored by liberals, such as union "card check" legislation, were ultimately blocked by members of the party's moderate bloc), but the widespread engagement in policy details and the willingness to compromise in order to improve the prospects of enactment reflected the demands of constituencies seeking substantive legislative achievements. This governing approach is also evident in the Democratic-controlled Senate of 2013-2014, in which party leaders have brokered agreements with members of the minority party in order to pass immigration reform legislation, unemployment insurance extensions, and other Democratic objectives.

Of course, congressional Democrats face challenges of their own. Several of the most ambitious legislative achievements of the Pelosi-led Congress, including the 2009 economic stimulus package, the Dodd-Frank financial reform bill, and (especially) the Affordable Care Act, ultimately proved controversial, if not downright unpopular, due to Republican figures' effective characterizations of them as "irresponsible spending," "government takeovers," "job killers" and even "socialism." Opponents tended to criticize these measures using these and other broad terms, sounding themes designed to resonate with a symbolically conservative mass public, even as proponents have attempted, often unsuccessfully, to publicize the specific attributes of the legislation that might find favor with operationally liberal voters. Unsurprisingly, surveys have consistently found that while the ACA itself is not especially popular with Americans, nearly all of its

individual provisions win majority approval—some by overwhelming margins (see Table 9)—reflecting the symbolic-vs.-operational divide that reliably characterizes American public opinion.

[Insert Table 9]

The Implications of Asymmetric Politics

The differences between the American left and right have both theoretical and practical implications for American politics. Political science has recently seen a renaissance of theorizing about the nature of political parties, with theories of the “extended party network” (Bawn et al. 2012) and “intense policy demanders” (Koger, Masket and Noel 2009) contending with slightly older views of parties as facilitating collective action by ambitious office-seekers (Aldrich 1995). These theories are ostensibly meant to apply to both the Democrats and Republicans, assuming few significant differences in their organization or strategy and no fundamental distinction in their means of cooperation. Yet we find two types of coalitions built on different collective sets of demands from government and therefore distinct views of the proper role of the party: an American right held together by a common ideology and an American left dedicated to satisfying the programmatic demands of particular social groups. Given that we only have two major American political parties and they are quite dissimilar, these findings complicate the task of building a general theory of party politics in the United States.

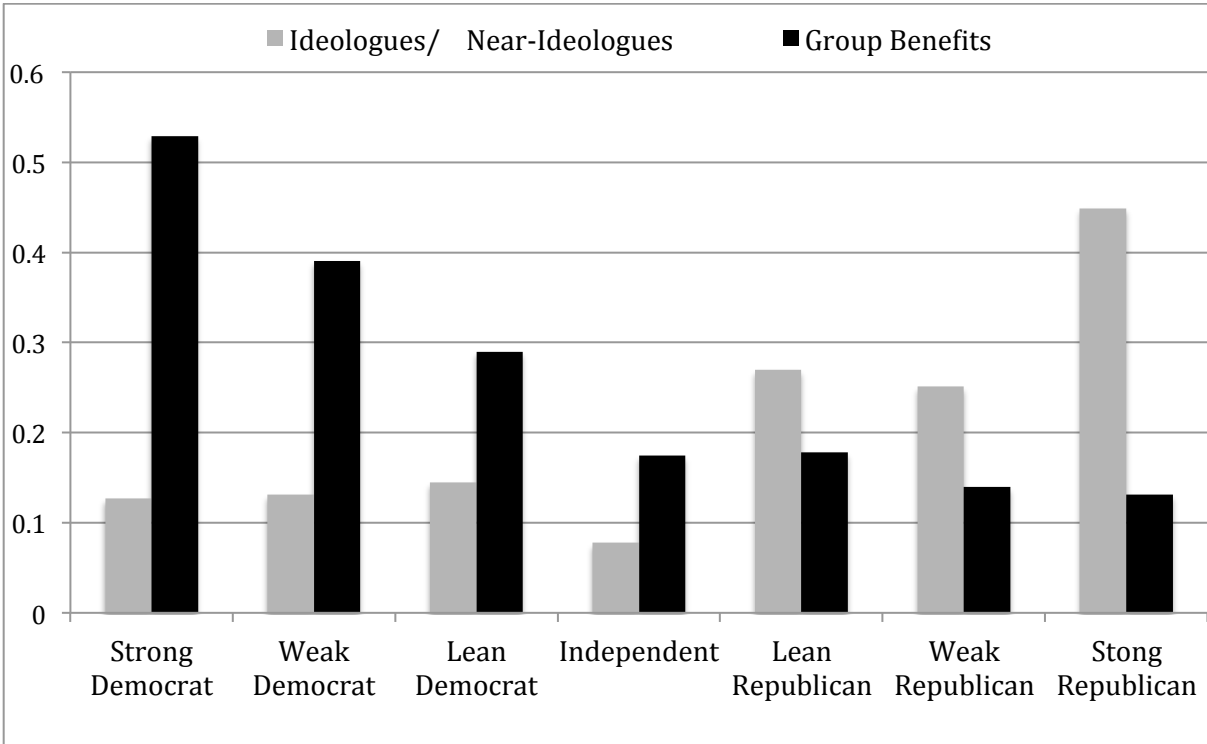
Viewing the two parties as fundamentally different might also allow political science to make better sense of contemporary politics. Within much of the popular commentary on the workings of the federal government, concerns over ideological polarization have recently given way to more specific critiques of contemporary Republican governance. As Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein memorably opined about congressional paralysis: “Let’s Just Say It: The Republicans Are the

Problem” (Mann and Ornstein 2012). There is more to this complaint than partisan mudslinging; indeed, even many Republicans have viewed the rising power of conservative activists and the ongoing internal disputes over ideological purity that have characterized the current GOP with concern, if not outright alarm, for how these developments threaten the party’s capacity to function effectively. Yet dismissive criticisms of the Tea Party and its allies in Congress as “unrealistic” or “crazy” fail to engage the question of why the movement’s appeal to Republican activists, donors, and primary voters is as strong as it is, or why governance looks so different with Republicans at the helm.

Increasing, asymmetric polarization has certainly contributed to gridlock in Washington, but we find that the roots of contemporary Republican intransigence run quite deep—and they are largely specific to the distinctive character of the American right. A party primarily defined by ideology will always remain particularly vulnerable to the charge that its leadership, faced as always with the real-world limitations of governing and the need to maintain electoral appeal beyond the party base, has strayed from its principles and must be forced back into line. Though the ability of conservative activists to enforce this purity has increased in recent years, the relative power of ideology as a definitional attribute of the right is, as our analysis reveals, quite long-lived. The American left has its own share of problems in governing, especially the task of holding a diverse coalition together, but overwhelming pressure from constituencies to maintain ideological fidelity is not nearly as great a challenge for Democrats as it is for today’s Republican leaders.

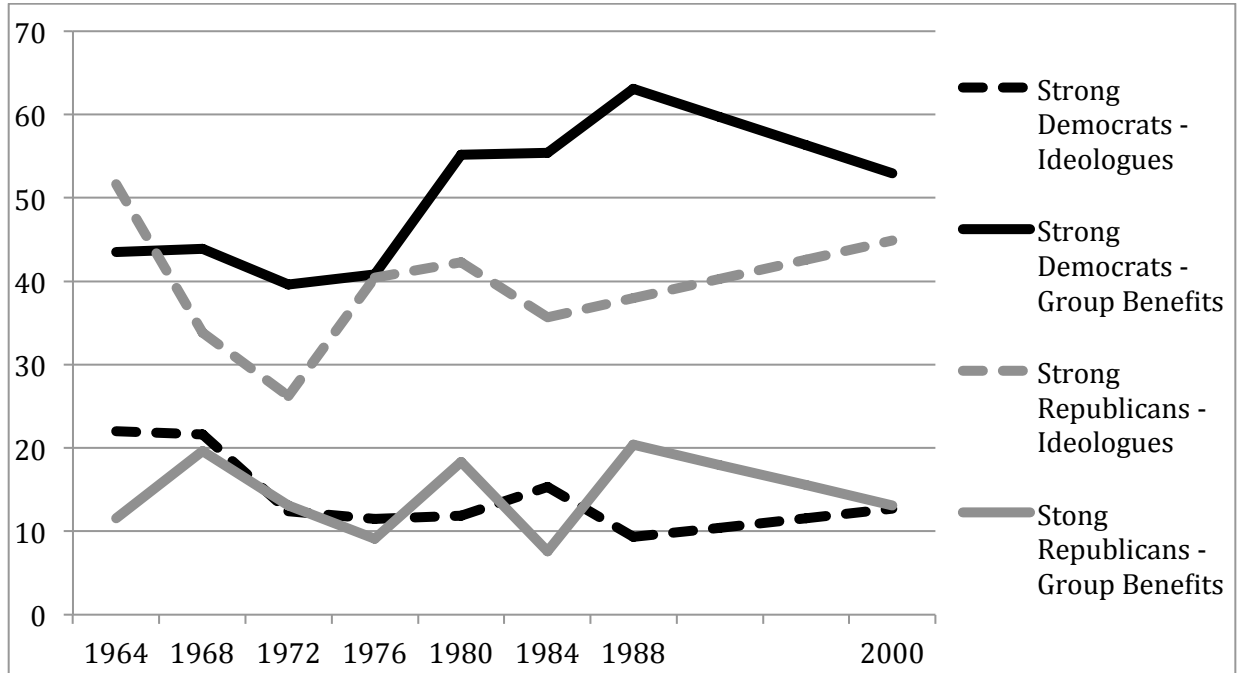
The two sides of American politics are built on distinct foundations. These differences are apparent at all levels of partisan conflict: from the mass public through the activist and donor classes to elected officials and other elites. For observers of contemporary Washington, the significant implications of this asymmetry for the operations of government are proving increasingly difficult to ignore.

Figure 1: Proportion in the Top Levels of Conceptualization by Party Identification



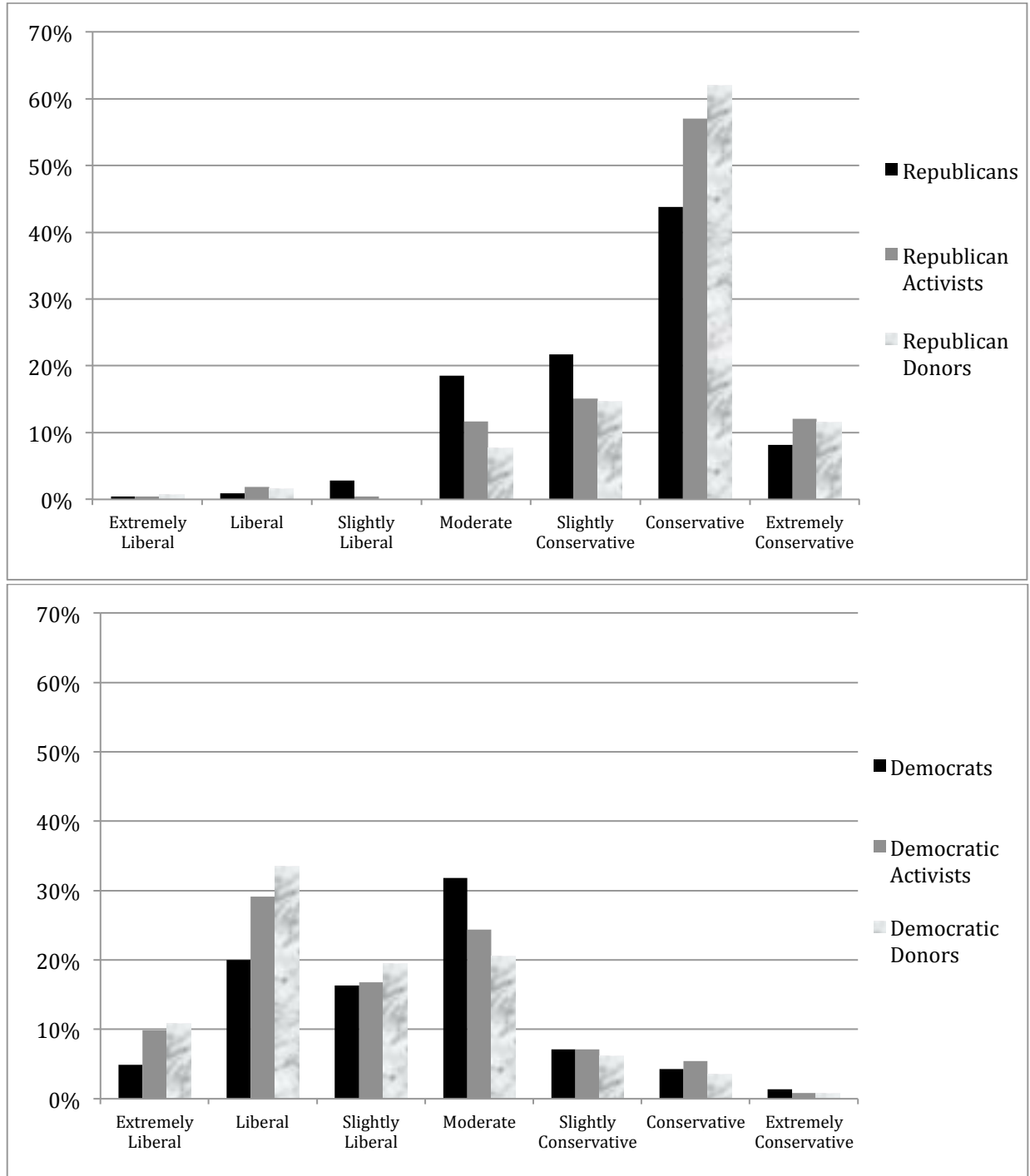
*The figure reports the proportion of respondents in each party identification category who were categorized as ideologues or near ideologues and as group benefits on the levels of conceptualization scale. The scale is based on open-ended responses regarding likes and dislikes of the two political parties and presidential candidates on the 2000 American National Election Studies survey. The coding was conducted by Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) and reported in *The American Voter Revisited*. These results were provided by Bill Jacoby.*

Figure 2: Percent of Strong Party Identifiers in Top Levels of Conceptualization



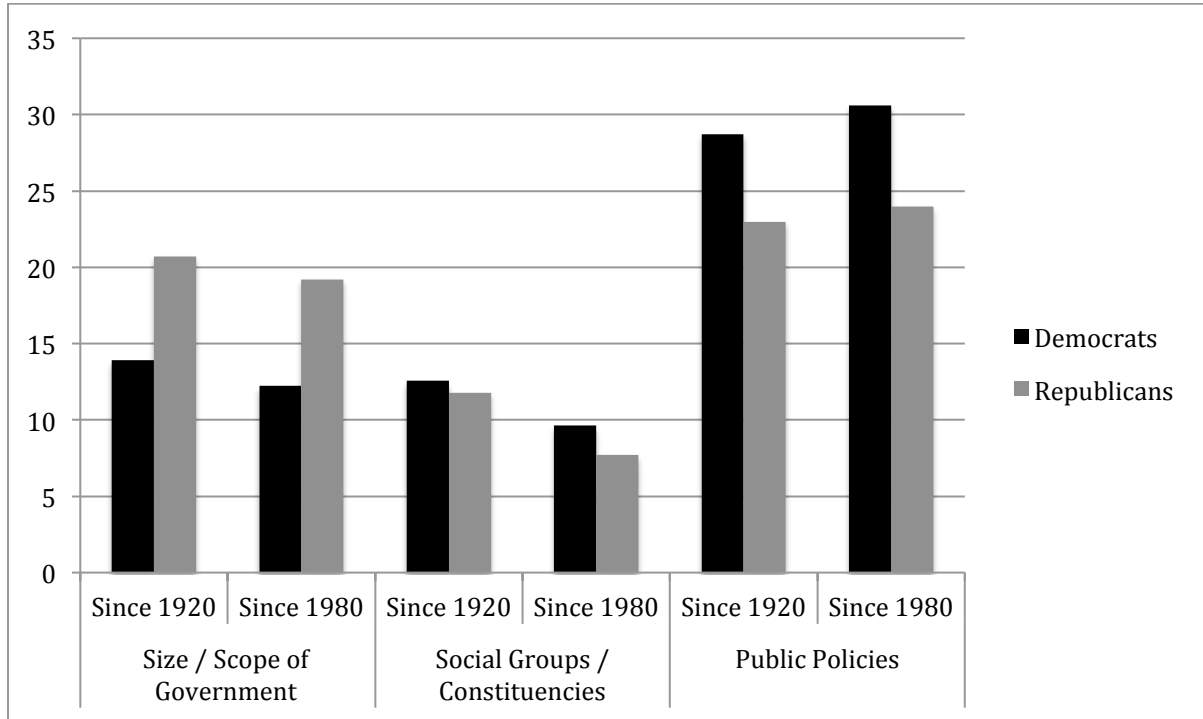
The figure reports the percent of strong party identifiers that were categorized into ideologues and group benefits on the levels of conceptualization scale. The scale is based on open-ended responses regarding likes and dislikes of the two political parties and presidential candidates on the American National Election Studies survey. The coding up to 1988 was conducted by Paul Hagner, John Pierce, and Kathleen Knight and is made available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. No levels of conceptualization codes were yet available for 1992, 1996, and 2004-2012.

Figure 3: Ideology among Partisans, Activists, and Donors



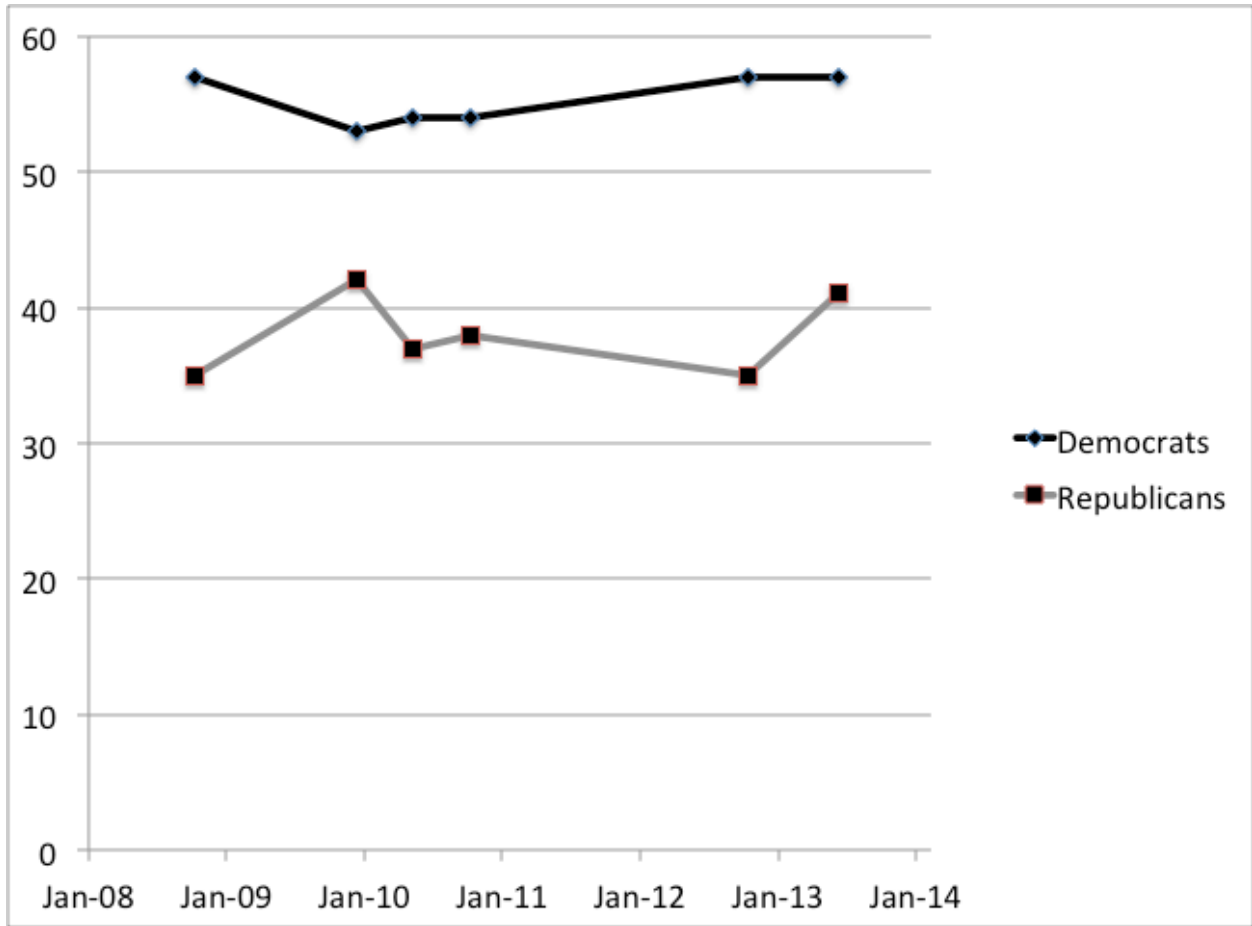
The figure illustrates the percent of Democratic and Republican activists, non-activists, and donors who fit into each ideological category. Activists are those that reported participating in two or more campaign activities. The authors analyzed the information from the American National Election Studies 2012 Time-Series Study.

Figure 4: Percent of Platforms Dedicated to Discussion of Ideology, Groups, and Policy



The figure reports the percent of the Democratic and Republican party platforms that were dedicated to discussions of ideology (the size and scope of government), social groups (or specific constituencies), and public policy (current or future proposals) in all presidential elections since 1920 and only those since 1980. Some discussions were mixed or fit into none of these three aggregate categories. These data were compiled from sentence-level hand coding of party platforms by the Comparative Manifestos Project. The ideological indicator includes categories 203, 204, 301-305, 401, and 412-414. The social group indicator includes categories 701 and 704-706. The policies indicator includes categories 402-404, 401, 504-507, 605, 606, and 703. More information is available at: <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>.

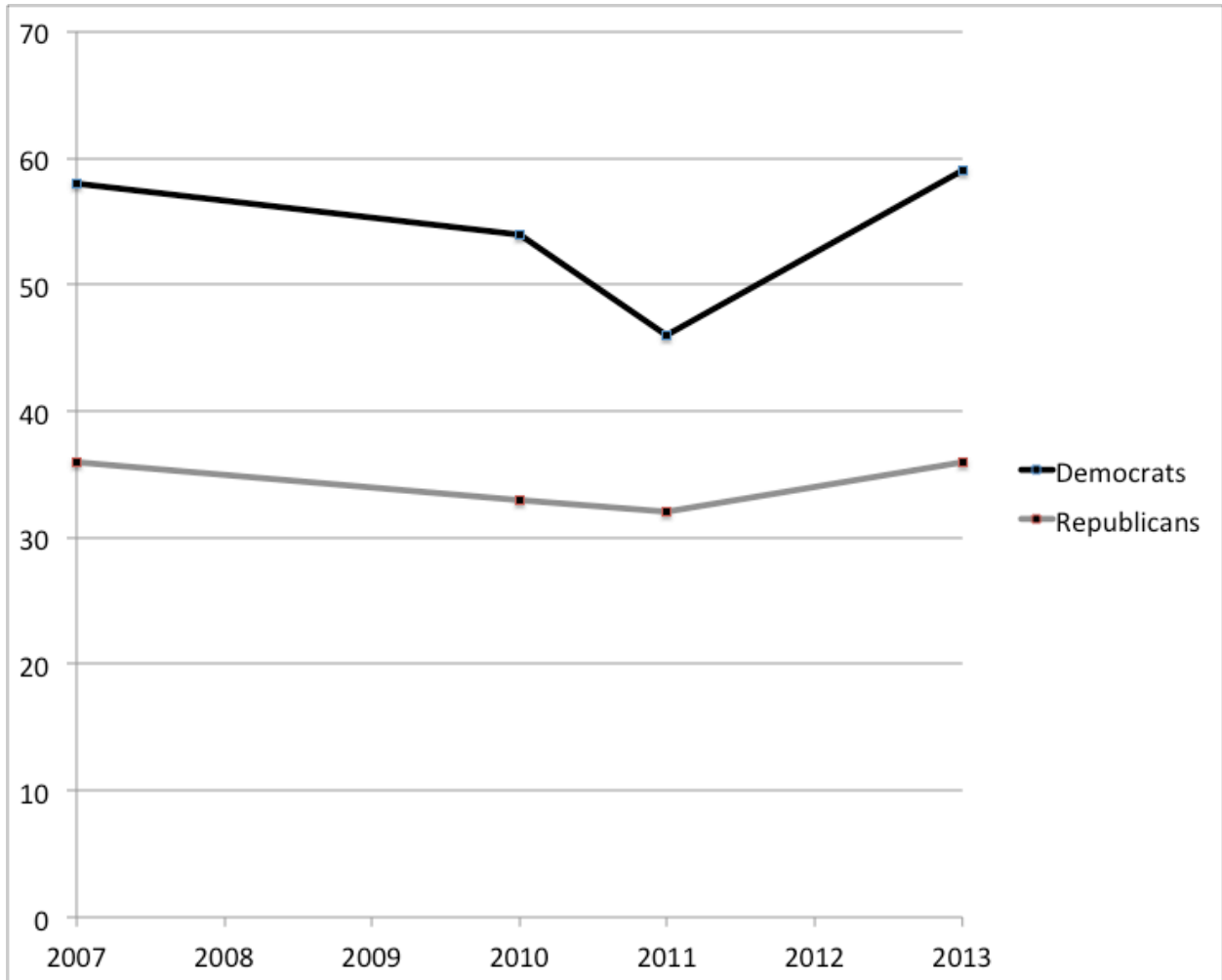
Figure 5: Percent Preferring Moderation to Ideological Purity by Party



The figure reports the share of each party's identifiers who say that they want their party's leaders to "move in a more moderate direction" (as opposed to "a more liberal/conservative direction")

Source: Pew Research Center surveys, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2013.

Figure 6: Percent Preferring Compromise over Principles by Party



The figure reports the share of each party’s identifiers who say that they admire politicians “who make compromises” (as opposed to “stick to their principles”).

Source: Pew Research Center surveys, 2007, 2010, 2011, and 2013.

Table 1: Average Percent of Liberal Responses to Survey Questions on Policy and Ideology

Specific Policy Opinions	
	Liberal %
Macroeconomics	59.8
Civil Rights	51.9
Health	74.9
Labor	53.3
Education	69.3
Environment	74.6
Energy	54.1
Transportation	77.9
Crime	54.2
Welfare	56.8
Commerce	59.3
General Ideological Attitudes	
	Liberal %
Self-Identification	35.1
Power of Government	28.9
Size of Government	34.4
Government Services	39.9

The table reports the percent of liberal responses (out of total liberal and conservative responses, not including moderate or unplaced responses) to survey questions regarding policy opinions and general ideological attitudes. We report the average of all years since 1981. James Stimson compiled the dataset and made it available via the Policy Agendas Project. Issue areas are categorized at policyagendas.org. Power of government includes the variables FEDSTATE and GOVPOW. Size of government includes MTOOBIG and THREATFX. Government services includes HEPLNOT, WATEALOT, NTYBIGGV, and SERVSPND.

Table 2: Operational and Symbolic Preferences in the American Electorate

		Symbolic	
		Liberal	Conservative
Operational	Liberal	29%	29%
	Conservative	4%	15%

The table reports the percentage of Americans that report liberal or conservative self-identification (symbolic) and liberal or conservative opinions on policy issues (operational). Approximately that self-identify as moderates or do not answer the policy questions are not included in the table. The data originate with the General Social Survey from 1973-2006 and were compiled by Ellis and Stimson (2012) and reported in Ideology in America.

Table 3: Total References to Types of Likes and Dislikes of Candidates and Parties

	Favorable to Democrats / Unfavorable to Republicans	Favorable to Republicans / Unfavorable to Democrats
Social Group Associations	2998	530
Domestic Policy Issues	4134	3677
Candidate Personal Attributes	3824	4674

*The table reports the total number of references to social groups and domestic policy issues or positions in open-ended responses regarding likes and dislikes of the two political parties and references to candidate attributes in likes and dislikes about candidates on the 2000 and 2004 American National Election Studies survey (adjusted to equalize the total number of references across election years). The coding was conducted by Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) and reported in *The American Voter Revisited*.*

Table 4: Social Group Coalitions of the Parties in the Electorate

Republican Coalition							
<i>Groups</i>	<i>Percentage of Group Voting Republican</i>						
	<i>Percentage of 2012 Electorate</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1992</i>
Whites	72	59	55	58	54	46	40
White Protestants	39	69	65	67	63	53	47
Married	60	56	52	57	53	46	41
Suburbanites	47	50	48	52	49	42	39

Democratic Coalition							
<i>Groups</i>	<i>Percentage of Group Voting Democratic</i>						
	<i>Percentage of 2012 Electorate</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1992</i>
Blacks	13	93	95	88	90	84	83
Latinos	10	71	67	56	67	72	61
Asians	3	73	62	56	54	43	31
Jews	2	69	78	74	79	78	80
Non-Religious	12	70	75	67	60	59	62
Union Household	18	58	59	59	59	59	55
Big City Residents	11	69	70	60	71	68	58
Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals	5	76	70	77	71	71	72

Bold indicates years in which the party won the electoral vote.

Source: National exit polls, 1992–2012.

Table 5: Conforming Views of Democratic and Republican Party Activists, 2012

	My Party Does Better for Interests of Women	Consistent View: Reason for Size of Government	Consistent View: General Government Services	Consistent View: Specific Social Programs
Democrats	77.3%	68.4%	44.4%	72.2%
Dem. Activists	91.9%	82.2%	62.6%	74.3%
Republicans	33.8%	80.1%	68.6%	35.4%
Rep. Activists	46.8%	90.9%	85.3%	52.4%

The table reports the percent of Democratic and Republican activists and non-activists who conform to their party's expected view on four questions: whether their party best represents the interests of women, their view of the reason for the size of government ("interferes with decisions should make yourself" for Republicans and "addressing social problems" for Democrats), their general view of government services ("provide more services" for Democrats and "provide fewer services" for Republicans), and their specific views of spending on government social programs (should increase in three or more categories for Democrats and should decrease in three or more categories for Republicans). Activists are those that reported participating in two or more campaign activities. The authors collected these data from the American National Election Studies 2012 Time-Series Study.

Table 6: Feelings of Democratic and Republican Donors in Congressional Elections

	Democratic Donors	Republican Donors
Average Feeling Toward Ideological Allies	70.7	78.9
Average Feeling Toward Ideological Opponents	23.8	13.7
Average Rating of Affiliated Interest Groups	57.6	47.3
Average Rating of Opposing Interest Groups	12.8	13.5
Candidate’s Ideology is Always Important	72.1%	80.4%
Endorsement from Group Always Important	16.1%	10.8%
Very Important to Influence Government Policy	69.7%	64.5%
Agree that Donors are Motivated by Ideology	49.2%	67.3%

*The table reports the average feeling thermometer ratings of Republican and Democratic donors toward their ideological allies and opponents (liberals and conservatives) and their average ratings across three interest groups on each side (Chamber of Commerce, National Rifle Association, Christian Coalition, Sierra Club, National Organization for Women, and AFL-CIO). We also report the percent of Democratic and Republican donors that rated factors always or very important and the percent that agree that donors are motivated by ideology. The results are from a survey of donors that contributed \$200 or more to congressional candidates in 1996. The survey was analyzed by Peter Francia in *The Financiers of Congressional Elections*, who provided us with additional data for this table.*

Table 7: Ideology and Policy Positions in Liberal and Conservative Opinion Columns

	# of Domestic Policy Proposals Supported		% Covering Domestic Policy Issues		% of Opinion Columns on General Ideology	
	1970	1990	1970	1990	1970	1990
Liberal	23	28	31.5%	27.2%	4.4%	1.8%
Conservative	7	10	25.5%	33.9%	15%	12.6%

The table reports the number of policy positions favored by newspaper and journal opinion columnists and the percent of their columns that primarily cover domestic policy issues or the size and scope of government (ideology). The data originates from Hans Noel, Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America. He supplied the raw data to the authors, who recoded it to create these aggregate categories.

Table 8: Violations of the “Hastert Rule” in the U.S. House, 2013–2014

Legislation	Date	Pct of Rep. Members Voting Yes
“Fiscal Cliff” Agreement	1/1/13	36 %
Hurricane Sandy Relief	1/15/13	21
Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization	2/28/13	39
Historic Battlefield Acquisition	4/9/13	45
Government Funding & Debt Ceiling Increase	10/16/13	38
Debt Ceiling Suspension	2/11/14	12

Source: House Votes Violating the “Hastert Rule,” *New York Times* website,
<https://politics.nytimes.com/congress/votes/house/hastert-rule>

Table 9: Public Opinion on Affordable Care Act Provisions, March 2013

Provision	Tot App%	D App%	R App%	(D-R)
Small business tax credits	88	96	83	13
Close Medicare “donut hole”	81	90	74	16
Health insurance exchanges	80	87	72	15
Stay on parents’ plan until age 26	76	84	68	16
Subsidies for insurance purchase	76	91	61	30
Medicaid eligibility expansion	71	88	42	46
Ban on denial due to pre-existing cond.	66	75	56	19
Medical loss ratio	65	72	62	10
Medicare tax increase on high incomes	60	80	37	43
Large employer mandate/penalty	57	79	36	43
Individual mandate/penalty	40	55	21	34
The Affordable Care Act	40	58	18	40

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation, “Kaiser Health Tracking Poll: March 2013,”
<http://kff.org/health-reform/poll-finding/march-2013-tracking-poll/>

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