

Political Polarization and Interest Groups
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Introduction

Recently the US Congress has gotten lost on the road to consensus. The 113th Congress is on pace to be the least productive in American history. Just last fall the nation saw the federal government's authority to spend money temporarily suspended in an attempt to force a repeal of the Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act, also known as Obamacare. The differences between Democrats and Republicans once seemed subtle to many Americans, but this has changed, and our current political environment is all the more tense because of this. In short, the area where these competing visions for the country once converged has collapsed, leaving few opportunities for *compromise* between liberals and conservatives. This is the space we refer to as the "political center."

Political observers and political scientists have speculated about the causes of the ideological polarization that characterizes contemporary American politics. One potential explanation for this is the proliferation of liberal and conservative interest groups in Washington, DC. Many interest groups score legislators based on their votes on legislation deemed critical to the interest group. For instance, the American Taxpayers Union evaluates legislators by choosing a number of tax-related votes each session, grading the legislators on the consistency of their alignment with the ATU positions. By announcing which votes will be scored and the group's preferences, interest groups hope to influence the votes cast on the floors of Congress and thus, the outcome of the vote. In turn, legislators seek to maximize their credentials as "liberals," and "conservatives," by voting consistently with groups popular with their party base. In addition to scoring what they consider "key votes," these interest groups routinely issue press releases concerning specific issues or pieces of legislation. Interest groups seek to raise the political stakes for legislators wishing for, or needing, a favorable rating. Some groups in recent electoral cycles have taken to recruiting candidates for intra-party challenges (running a Republican against another

Republican) if a politician is found to be insufficiently “pure” from an ideological standpoint. In the last electoral cycle incumbent Republican Senators Richard Lugar (IN) and Robert Bennett (UT) were defeated in their party primaries; in this electoral cycle the Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell (KY) and Senator John Cornyn (TX) have both drawn challenges from the political right. While fairly rare these primary challenges send an important message to incumbents: Toe the line or risk a potential primary defeat. To be named a RINO (Republican in Name Only) in today’s political climate is toxic.

This research explores the relationship between interest group policy preferences and the ideological behavior of members of the House of Representatives. Using a method to estimate the policy “ideal points” of interest groups we are able to explore the degree to which the political parties seem to be drawn away from the political center by the shifting positions of interest groups. We conclude that there is reason to believe that there is a correlation between group and party behavior in House and suggest next steps in this research agenda.

Methodology

To establish the data for our research we used Poole and Rosenthal’s NOMINATE algorithm. NOMINATE estimates the ideal points of legislators using their votes on all legislation. The ideal points produced for our legislators and interest groups are displayed in a two-dimensional space. In this space the x-axis represents ideology and the y-axis represents salient policy cleavages. With the announced policy positions of interest groups on individual votes in the House and the NOMINATE algorithm we were able to estimate interest groups’ ideal policy points as if they were actual lawmakers. The resulting data allows us to estimate the policy ideal points for interest groups relative to the ideal points for individual members of Congress. In this paper we examine the Republican controlled House of Representatives from the years 1992-2012. We chose this time frame because it is widely understood to be the period when the political center began to collapse and brings the analysis into the recent past.

Findings

Figure 1 contains five scatter plots, one each for the 102nd, 104th, 106th, 109th, and 112th Congresses. The X-axis represents political ideology, with extremely liberal being -1 and extreme conservatism being +1. The y-axis represents salient political and policy cleavages. Each blue (Democratic) and red (Republican) dot represents a specific lawmaker; the dots represent each lawmaker's ideal point in two-dimensional space. The triangles labeled "P" on each side represent the median position of each party. The triangles labeled "G" represent the median interest group position. The distance between the P and G on the left and right of the ideological spectrum represents the distance between the median ideal point of interest groups and the median position of the party. The change in these distances over time indicates whether there is a correlation between interest group preference and trends in party voting.

In the first scatter plot each party's median is more or less the same distance away from the center of the x-axis. The same can be said for each interest group median. In the following charts there is observable deviation away from these points. The median point of liberal interest groups between the 102nd and 112th Congress moves very slightly towards the center. The median position of the Democratic representatives in this same time period moves just slightly away from the center. These movements bring the two median positions (those of the liberal groups and the Democratic Party) closer together. On the right side the shifts are much more pronounced. Conservative groups move a notch to the right in the 104th Congress, bringing them very close to the +1.0 representing extreme conservatism. This median remains through the 112th Congress. In each scatter plot the median position of the Republican median moves to the right, seemingly on a path toward interest group preferences. By the 112th Congress the median position of Republican members of the House is closer to that of conservative interest groups than at any other time we observed.

Figure 2 illustrates the change in difference in party and interest group medians over the entire

time period. The solid line represents the change in distance between the Democrat and Republican median position over time. The dashed line is the change in difference between the liberal and conservative group medians. The red and blue vertical lines represent the gap between the median positions of each party and the corresponding ideological groups (Democratic-Liberal and Republican-Conservative). In this graph, the distance between the liberal and conservative interest group medians is increasing. The solid line showing the change in the distance between party medians rises steadily, thus, confirming that the two parties are diverging from one another.

The movement of interest groups ideal positions over time is more subdued than the House parties. Since the 102nd Congress we have observed the median point of conservative groups shifting slightly to the right, with most of that shift coming at the same time as Gingrich's ascension. These groups, however, started out beyond the half-way mark to +1 (extreme conservatism) and have ended up about 80% there. Thus, for the Republican Party median to move towards interest group preferences it must move into the far right side of the spectrum. Therefore, if interest groups are indeed having an effect on party voting trends, it is no wonder the center has disappeared. In light of this data, there is also little doubt as to which party's voting behaviors have been the catalyst for this collapse. The median point of liberal groups saw little to no change since the 102nd Congress and has actually moved towards the center and the Democratic Party median in recent years. This may be a strategic calculation on the part of liberal groups not to push too hard to the left in an attempt to gain moderate voters being left behind by an increasingly conservative Republican Party.

Conclusion

Ideological polarization has created near gridlock in Congress making it nearly impossible for the body to legislate. Some suggest that this is a result of the influence of interest groups that make it difficult for some members to find grounds for compromise. This research examines the relationship between interest groups policy preferences and the behavior of partisans in the House. This work

represents the preliminary stages of our academic inquiries into the relationship between the policy preferences of interest groups and legislators. We expected to observe equal divergence from the center by both parties and the interest groups supporting them. Our findings indicate that over the span of ten Congresses the difference between the conservative interest group median and the Republican Party median was reduced, that is, Republican House members moved closer to the ideal points of conservative interest groups. Our graphics suggest a correlation between interest group preferences and congressional voting behavior on the political right. Because this data is preliminary research, one cannot conclude that the relationship is causal. However, we have laid a foundation for the next stage of research. The next iteration of this research seeks to establish a causal link between interest groups and the behavior of legislators.

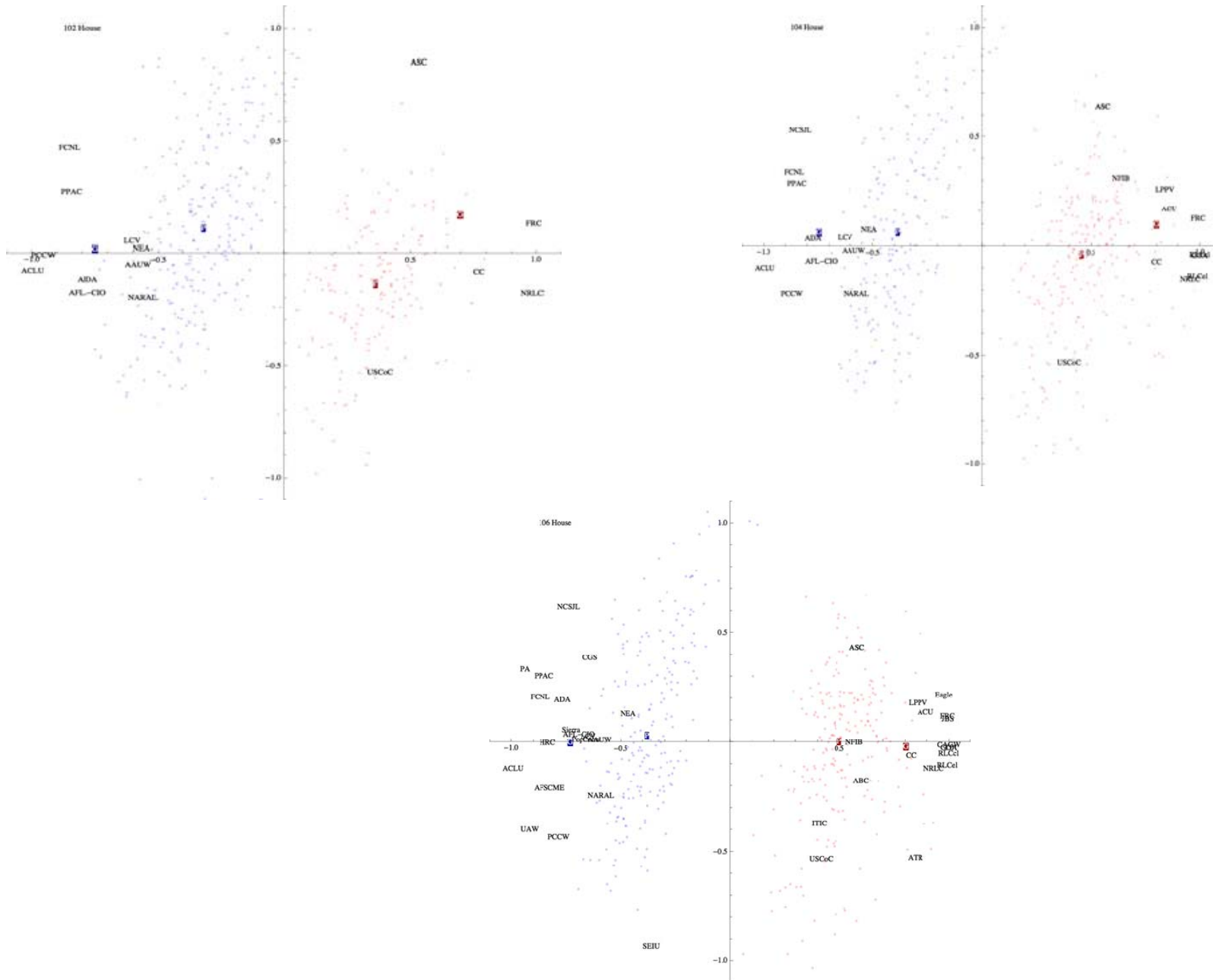


Figure 1: Ideal points of House members and interest groups

Note: Blue dots represent the ideal points of Democratic House members, the red dots the ideal points of Republican House members. Acronyms represent the ideal points of interest groups. "P" indicates the party medians, "G" the group medians.

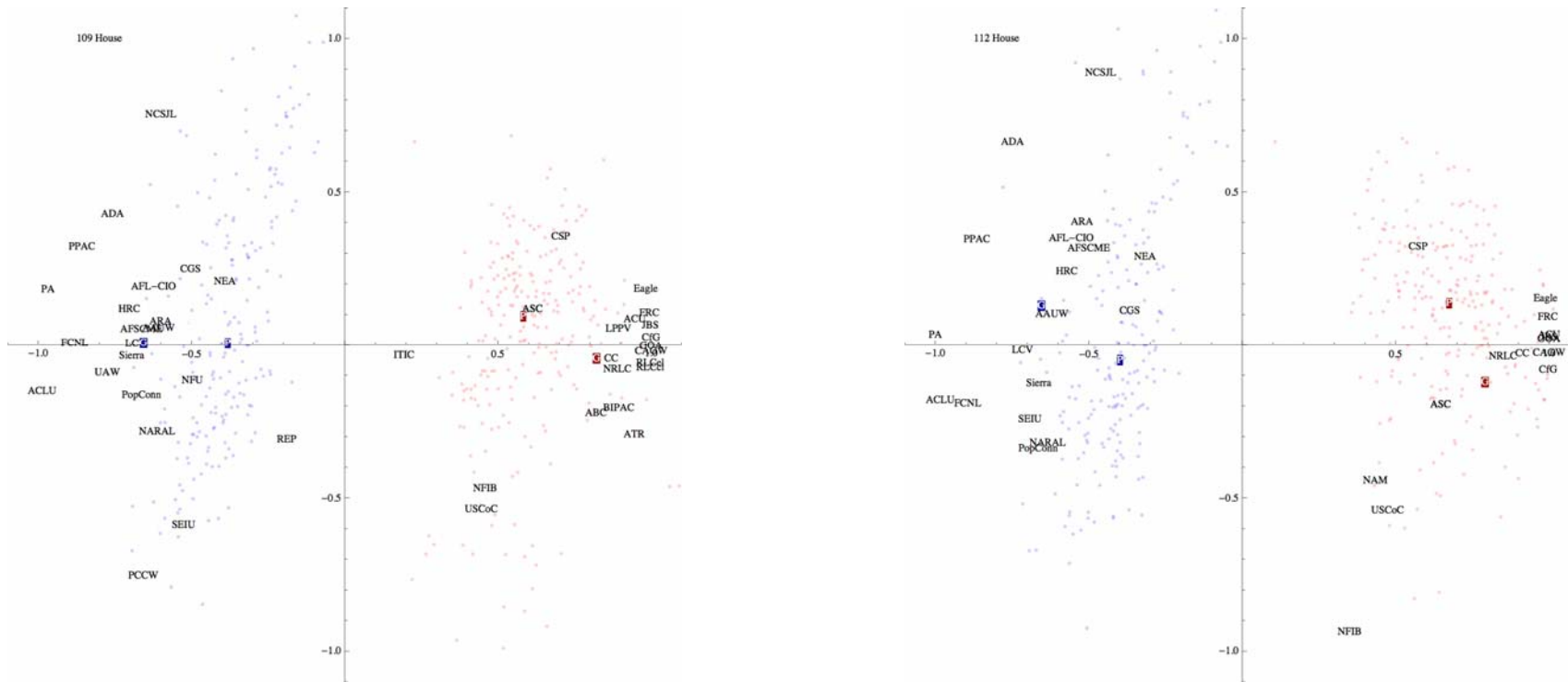


Figure 1: Ideal points of House member and interest groups, continued

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| AFL-CIO | AFL-CIO | Club for Growth CFG | National Farmers Union NFU |
| Alliance for Retired Americans ARA | | Eagle Forum Eagle | National Federation of Independent Businesses NFIB |
| American Association of American Women AAUW | | Family Research Council FRC | National Right to Life Committee NRLC |
| American Civil Liberties Union ACLU | | Friends Committee on National Legislation FCNL | Peace Action PA |
| American Conservative Union ACU | | Gun Owners of America GOA | Peace PAC PPAC |
| American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees AFSCME | | Human Rights Campaign HRC | Population Connection PopConn |
| America Security Council ASC | | Information Technology Industry Council ITIC | Public Citizen's Congress Watch PCCW |
| Americans for Democratic Action ADA | | John Birch Society JBS | Republicans for Environmental Protection REP |
| Americans for Tax Reform ATR | | League of Conservation Voters LCV | Republican Liberty Caucus (Civil Liberty) RLCCl |
| Associated Builders and Contractors ABC | | League of Private Property Voters LPPV | Republican Liberty Caucus (Economic Liberty) RLCEl |
| Business Industry PAC BIPAC | | National Abortion Rights Action League NARAL | Service Employees International Union SEIU |
| Christian Coalition CC | | National Association of Manufacturers NAM | Sierra Club Sierra |
| Citizens Against Government Waste CAGW | | National Catholic Social Justice Lobby NCSJL | United Auto Workers UAW |
| | | National Education Association NEA | US Chamber of Commerce USCoC |



Figure 2:
 Note: Dashed line represents the distance between the medians of the liberal and conservative clusters of interest groups; the solid line the distance between the medians of the two political parties. Vertical “fishbones” represent the distance between the Democratic Party median and the liberal group median (blue), and the Republican Party median and the conservative group median (red)