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News

“From the Koch brothers and Art Pope to George Soros and Michael Bloomberg, wealthy donors are making North Carolina’s U.S. Senate race one of America’s first $100 million contests,” the Charlotte Observer reports. “Outside groups continue to flood the state with ads and accusations, forcing Democratic U.S. Sen. Kay Hagan and Republican Thom Tillis to keep scrambling for dollars in the campaign’s final two weeks. Money spent or committed in the race is poised to top $103 million, according to public records and interviews with donors. Three-quarters of it comes from party and interest groups. More than $22 million is dark money from groups that don’t disclose their donors.”

New York Times: “In 2010, the Citizens United decision by the Supreme Court effectively blew apart the McCain-Feingold restrictions on outside groups and their use of corporate and labor money in elections. That same year, a related ruling from a lower court made it easier for wealthy individuals to finance those groups to the bottom of their bank accounts if they so chose. What followed has been the most unbridled spending in elections since before Watergate. “This result was a massive power shift, from the party bosses to the rich individuals who ran the super PACs (as most of these new organizations came to be called). With the advent of Citizens United, any players with the wherewithal, and there are surprisingly many of them, can start what are in essence their own political parties, built around pet causes or industries and backing politicians uniquely answerable to them. No longer do they have to buy into the system. Instead, they buy their own pieces of it outright, to use as they see fit.”
Reagan was thus able to forge major bipartisan agreements to cut taxes in 1981, raise taxes in 1982, fix Social Security during Ronald Reagan's administration, about 40% of the members of Congress could be described as moderates.

Between 1977 and 2013. As David Karol points out, Lugar himself did not change very much over time: he was a reliable conservative who moved only somewhat towards the center during a 30-plus year career (from a DW-NOMINATE first order score of 0.348 to 0.241). DW-NOMINATE scores range (with slight simplification) from -1 to +1 or a band of conservative who moved only somewhat towards the center during a 30-plus year career (from a DW-NOMINATE first order score of 0.348 to 0.241). DW-NOMINATE scores range (with slight simplification) from -1 to +1 or a band of


economic and social issues. And they started talking, often at length and in surprisingly thoughtful ways, about their jobs. It ended up talking to ninety members—a third of the Senate, more than a tenth of the House. They have all been eager to talk, as if they wanted to get something off their chest. They represent the full ideological spectrum, and the full field bouquet of American accent, and an almost astonishing variety of biography.

But who really cares about the real plight of members of Congress? “I had $42 million dropped into my 2012 race by outside groups—$42 million—a record that will likely be smashed this year in North Carolina, now that the Supreme Court has become almost an arm of corporate America. I’m not whining about this,” says Sherrod Brown, Democratic senator from Ohio, “Because nobody cares about the problems of people in our position. No whining on the yacht!”

Except, of course, that their dilemma is our disaster. I had initially planned to ask for no more than ten minutes of their time, basically just to ask them why they were so bad at that job. But fairly quickly it became obvious that these were going to be richer and deeper conversations than I had bargained for. And along the way, something unexpected happened: I became less angry and more sympathetic to the thrasher that all of these people had themselves caught in. They are not whining. They are crying for help. After only a few interviews, I stopped asking, “Why are you so bad at your job?” because it occurred to me that it was a cheap question, the kind of question that’s not interested in an answer, which is just the sort of cultural deformity that got us into this mess. It’s a terrible job, being in Congress in 2014.

“It’s become shirts versus skins far too often,” says Republican senator Jeff Flake of Arizona. “A couple of years ago, I got invited to play basketball with the president, myself and nine other House members. And I was in the White House in the basement lacing up my shoes, and I got a call on my cell phone. Somehow somebody patched it through, and it was a woman from Arizona, a constituent, crying hysterically. ‘Don’t play basketball with the president! It’s become shirts versus skins far too often,’ says Republican senator Jeff Flake of Arizona. ‘A couple of years ago, I got invited to play basketball with the president, myself and nine other House members. And I was in the White House in the basement lacing up my shoes, and I got a call on my cell phone. Somehow somebody patched it through, and it was a woman from Arizona, a constituent, crying hysterically. ‘Don’t play basketball with the president!’”

In the weirdest start of a gubernatorial debate, Florida Gov. Rick Scott initially refused to take the stage Wednesday night because Democrat Charlie Crist insisted on using a fan to keep him cool,” the Miami Herald reports. “The Republican governor finally emerged at least six minutes late as flummoxed moderators struggled on live TV to figure out what to do with a hometown CNN standing solo-on-stage at Broward College.” Said Crist: “Are we really going to debate about a fan? Or are we going to talk about education and the environment and the future of our state?” I mean, really.”


target to the methods we use to measure this phenomenon. One frequently raised concern (see a recent statement by Sean Trende) is that Congress may not have polarized as we have claimed in publications and blogs stretching as far back as 1984. The concern is that the meaning of ideological (DW-NOMINATE) scores are tied to the legislative and historical context of the roll call votes that are used to estimate them. For example, the content of roll call votes cast by members of 90th Senate that dealt with the Vietnam War, civil rights, and funding for LBJ’s “Great Society” programs are quite different than those votes cast in the current Senate. Thus, being the most conservative senator (with a score of 1.0) in 1969 would mean something different than having an identical 1.0 score in 2012.

With the rise of ever-simpler cohorts, we can make the ever-simplest comparisons needed to analyze polarization. A good example is Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN), who, after his primary defeat last week, will have served in the Senate between 1977 and 2013. As Richard Lugar points out, Lugar himself did not change very much over time. He was a reliable conservative who moved only somewhat towards the center during 36 plus year career (from 0.348 to 0.241). DW-NOMINATE scores range (with slight simplification) from -1 to +1 or a band of

Polarization is Real (and Asymmetric)

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Are Fox and MSNBC polarizing America?

Matt Levendusky, The Monkey Cage:
A generation ago, if ordinary Americans tuned on the television at 6 p.m., they had basically one choice to watch the evening news. They could have chosen to watch ABC, CBS, or NBC, but it wouldn’t really have mattered, because they all basically gave the same news in a similar format. Today, if they did that, they would have hundreds of options, including not just the news, but also sports, movies, re-runs, and so forth. Even within news, they have a variety of choices. Not only would they have the major network news programs, but they would have many choices on cable, most notably the partisan outlets of Fox News and MSNBC (not to mention even more choices online). This choice of explicitly partisan outlets means that individuals can choose to hear messages that reinforce their beliefs, while avoiding those from alternative points of view, which some claim leads to polarization. Does this high-choice media environment, especially with its partisan outlets, polarize the public?

The evidence suggests that the media may contribute to polarization, but in a more circumscribed way than many commentators suggest. Take first the question of choice, and in particular, whether people seek out media choices that reinforce their existing beliefs. The answer is (perhaps not surprisingly) yes: Republicans are more likely to tune in to Fox News and liberals are more likely to watch MSNBC. Researchers have also found that these effects are stronger for those who are more partisan and politically involved.

But there is perhaps an even more important type of selection at work. While the political can tune into Fox and MSNBC, those who dislike politics also have more options than ever for avoiding it. In lieu of the nightly news—or a televised presidential address—they can watch Sports Center, Entertainment Tonight, or a rerun of The Big Bang Theory. When confronted with a political option, they simply change the channel to something else that they find more agreeable. Even the most popular cable news programs get 2 to 3 million viewers on a typical evening in a country of 300 million Americans. In earlier decades, some of these individuals would have been incidentally exposed to political news and information (by, say, watching the television news at 6 o’clock, when there were no other options). Now that they can avoid news altogether, they know less about politics and are less likely to participate. So the growth of media choice strengthens the extremes while hollowing out the center, making the electorate more divided.

Short Essays

1. Great news! Your best friend, Pat, is getting married. Accordingly, Pat asks you to give a speech at the wedding. While initially nervous, you realize that this speech is the perfect time for you to demonstrate your knowledge of the Corrupt Bargain of 1824. A good wedding speech should include not only a description of what happened during the Corrupt Bargain, but a discussion of relevant political science literature. Was the corrupt bargain actually corrupt? What do Jenkins and Sala (1998) say? Carson and Engstrom (2005)?

2. Whooo! You have completed Professor Madonna’s POLS 4105 course and are home for the summer. At a family get-together, your Uncle Frank demands to know what your commie pinko Professor taught you about the Civil War. Specifically, he demands to know what factors lead to the growing divide between the North and the South. Were there any solutions to the problems the two sides were facing? What were they? Why did they fail? And finally, who won the Civil War? Uncle Frank has probably had too many frescas…
Short Essays

3. Tragic news! Due to irresponsible planning on your part, you forgot to get tickets to the opening night showing of "Dumb and Dumber To." Fortunately, you know that a local radio show is holding a contest where you can win tickets provided you're the twelfth caller and can answer a series of questions. On your third attempt, you successfully reach the station. The local DJ, Doctor Demento, than asks you to explain the role parties play in the United States Congress. Do they matter independent of preferences? The DJ asks you to justify your answers with citations to the relevant literature.

4. Uh-oh. Professor Madonna has just gotten another article rejected from a reputable political science journal. After class, he informs you that he is starting to crack under the pressure, and is unsure if he was cut out for the rock and roll lifestyle of a political scientist. As one of his best students, he asks you to help him out by taking the competing theories outlined in the slides from his Bank Bill paper and apply them to another key bill considered in the Antebellum era. What were those theories? Which one did you find more persuasive? Using either the case of the Oregon Bill, Kansas-Nebraska Act, or Cuba Acquisition Bill, defend your answer.

Conclusion

Questions?

Study! Test Wednesday!