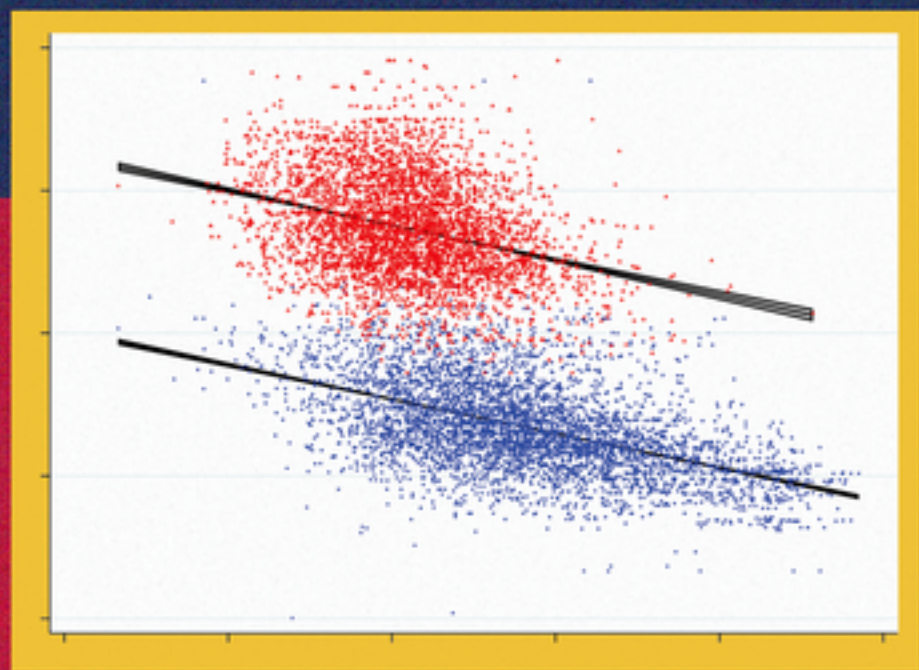


SAMUEL MERRILL III  
BERNARD GROFMAN and  
THOMAS L. BRUNELL

# How Polarization Begets Polarization



Ideological Extremism in the US Congress

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*IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM IN THE  
US CONGRESS*

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# Contents

*Acknowledgments* vii

## PART I: WHERE DID POLARIZATION COME FROM AND WHY IS IT GETTING WORSE?

1. Making Sense of Polarization 3
2. How Does Party Discipline Generate Polarization? 20
3. Why, Even in Highly Competitive Districts, Are Candidate Positions So Different? 41
4. Heterogeneity across Districts and within-District Partisan Gap and Proclivity 59

## PART II: CONSEQUENCES OF POLARIZATION

5. How Do Party Loyalty and Activists Encourage Mobilizing the Base? 75
6. Consequences of Polarized Politics 95
7. Discussion and Conclusions 117

*Appendix to Chapter 1: Literature Review on Causes of Polarization* 127

*Appendix to Chapter 2: The Party-Constraint Model* 131

*Appendix to Chapter 3: Relation between Candidate and District Ideology: Statistical and Theoretical Analyses* 141

*Appendix to Chapter 4: Components of Legislative Polarization* 149

*Appendix to Chapter 5: Derivations for the Appeal-to-the-Base Model* 155

*Appendix to Chapter 6: Derivations Relating to Chamber and Party Medians* 161

*Bibliography* 167

*Index* 181



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known for his modesty, Nelson once told Bernie that he himself had forgotten more about Congress than Bernie would ever know. Now, a quarter century later, it is hard to disagree with him. Nonetheless, were he alive, perhaps he would find that the models in this book could tell him at least a few things about Congress that he hadn't already known.

This book continues the attempt to integrate ideas from different research streams into a single model that was the intention of two of our previous books: *A Unified Theory of Voting* (Merrill and Grofman) and *A Unified Theory of Party Competition* (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman). The first merged ideas about optimal party ideological location, derived from Downsian proximity models of voting, with work on directional models of voting; the second blended ideas from neo-Downsian spatial models of party competition with social-psychology perspectives on party identification. The present volume integrates work on candidate competition at the constituency level with work on polarization between parties in Congress. Taken collectively, these books are intended to provide their readers with essential insights into voter choice, party and candidate competition, and voting patterns within a legislature.

PART I

WHERE DID POLARIZATION  
COME FROM AND WHY IS IT  
GETTING WORSE?



# 1

## Making Sense of Polarization

### 1.1. Introduction

That the contemporary state of polarization in American politics is viewed as a matter of grave concern cannot be in doubt. There are scores of academic articles and hundreds of journalistic essays condemning polarization,<sup>1</sup> and there are now multiple books on the topic.<sup>2</sup> According to the Stanford law professor and political scientist Nathaniel Persily in the introduction to *Solutions to Political Polarization in America* (2015b), “Political polarization dominates discussions of contemporary American politics,” and there is “widespread agreement that the dysfunction in the political system can be attributed to political polarization.”

But political polarization has not always been characteristic of American politics. A famous Report from a committee of the American Political Science Association in 1950 called for a more responsible two-party system. As summarized by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in his review of the Report in the *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1951, 222), “The committee’s objective is to transform the present sprawling and illogical system into a centralized and logical system which will define alternative policies with clarity and will guarantee their execution through improved means of party discipline.” One could say that this ambition has now been fulfilled, but it is also well known that getting what one wishes for can be dangerous, as Schlesinger also stated eloquently in the same review.

We now have widely separated and internally homogeneous political camps, each responsible to its respective “base,” but unfortunately our politics is beset with gridlock, obstruction, and the inability to compromise to get things done. In this book we highlight polarization in Congress and focus

<sup>1</sup> A very small sampling would include Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), Theriault (2008), Abramowitz (2010), Iyengar and Westwood (2015), Klein and Chang (2015), Thomsen (2017), Krassa and Polborn (2018), Zingher (2018), McCarty (2019), and Bartels (2020).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Hopkins and Sides (2015), Persily (2015b), Rosenfeld (2017), McCarty (2019), Klein (2020), and Zingher (2022).

primarily on the first of three aspects of polarization identified by Persily (2015b, 4); namely, “ideological convergence within parties and divergence between parties,” which he calls *hyperpartisanship*. But we recognize that polarization can be viewed as a multi-stranded concept, and that sometimes it is hard to distinguish the presence of polarization from its consequences.

## 1.2. Measuring Polarization in the US Congress

We begin with a definition:

*Legislative polarization* is the ideological gap between Democratic and Republican ideologies, which is quantified as the difference between the mean ideological positions of the Democratic and Republican delegations in Congress, and in particular within the US House, along with the intraparty variations within each of the delegations.

To be specific, our primary measure of the degree of legislative polarization in the US Congress is the difference—assessed in terms of roll-call voting patterns—between the mean policy/ideological positions of the Republican and Democratic delegations in a one-dimensional spatial model. In this book we focus primarily on the US House of Representatives. The spatial model of which we speak places parties, candidates, and voters on a line, with points to the left representing liberal positions on policy issues or a liberal ideology and points to the right reflecting conservative positions and ideology. A one-dimensional representation of US party competition is an oversimplification, but social and economic dimensions of evaluation by legislators have become more correlated over time, with a single dimension explaining most of the variance in roll-call voting.

To determine the mean positions of the party delegations in the House, we employ the DW-NOMINATE scores, developed by Poole and Rosenthal (1997), which place legislators on a liberal-to-conservative scale from  $-1.0$  on the left to  $+1.0$  on the right. The legislator scores are based on their roll-call votes, using an algorithm that provides comparability between the scores of members of Congress serving in different eras (see, e.g., McCarty, 2019, for an overview of this procedure). The first dimension of the DW-NOMINATE scores reflects primarily economic issues and is conventionally used to represent a liberal-to-conservative continuum.

Figure 1.1A plots the means of the (first dimension of) DW-NOMINATE scores of the party delegations in the US House from 1856 to 2020.<sup>3</sup> These party means were at their most disparate about 1900 and again after 2000, whereas they were least separated from one another shortly after the Civil War and particularly for a period around 1940–1970. It is thus clear from the historical record that, in the US House, the degree of legislative polarization has ebbed and flowed over the past century and a half of the modern two-party era. In particular, we note the apparent cyclic nature of the pattern of ideological change in the House throughout this period.

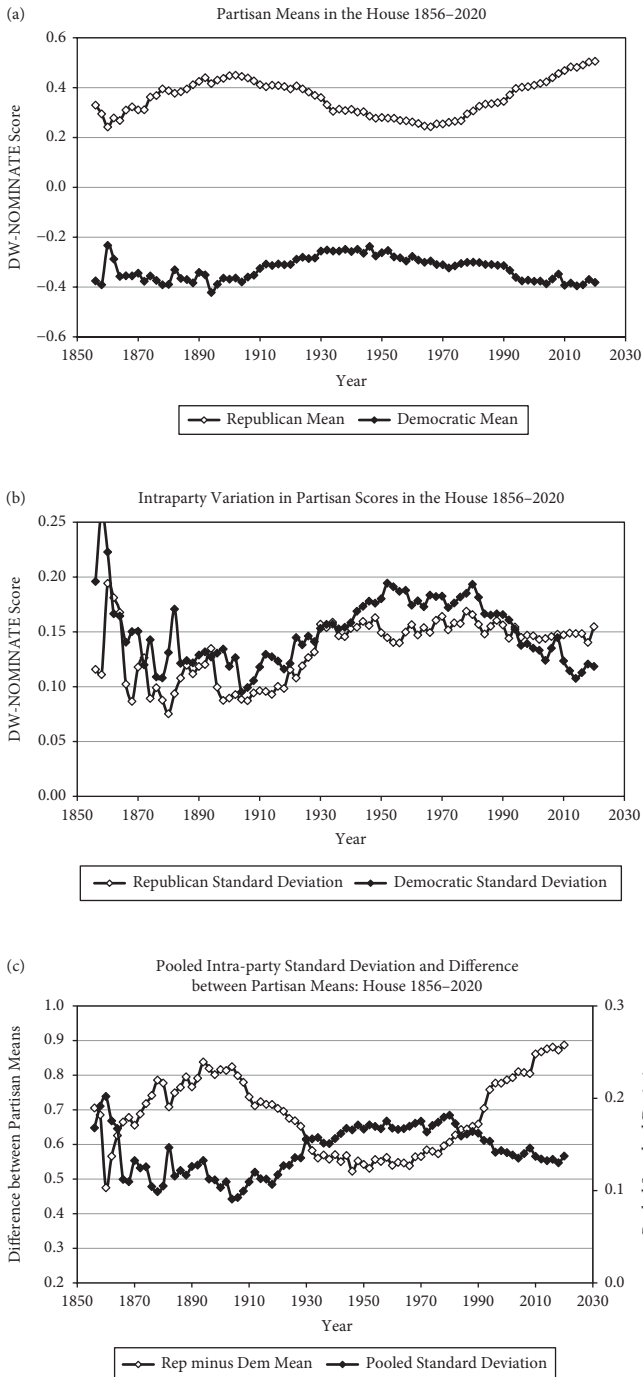
Figure 1.1B shows that, furthermore, for both parties our secondary measure of legislative polarization—intraparty variation—was relatively small (i.e., variation within each party was lower) at approximately the times that partisan separation was greatest (during the late 19th century and, for the Democratic Party, at the beginning of the 21st century). Intraparty variance was high when partisan separation was low (for a short period around 1860 and again from about 1950 to 1980). Figure 1.1C places in sharp focus the inverse relationship between party separation and intraparty variation by plotting the separation between the parties and the pooled intraparty standard deviation on the same graph. The negative correlation between partisan separation and pooled standard deviation is highly significant, as are the negative correlations between partisan separation and the separate standard deviations for Democrats and Republicans, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, typically, when Congress, and the House in particular, is highly polarized, variance *within* each party is low—that is, party delegations are relatively homogeneous. Despite the noise in the data, high separation between narrow distributions of partisans is characteristic of strong polarization; reduced separation and broad (often overlapping) distributions are characteristic of low polarization. Hence, a theoretical model of polarization should predict an inverse relationship between party separation and intraparty variance over the long term (as we will see from our model in Chapter 2). In the next section we introduce that model.

However, for purposes of conceptual clarity we wish to distinguish polarization within Congress from ideological differentiation between the

<sup>3</sup> The data for Figure 1.1 are obtained from the website: <https://voteview.com/data> (accessed Feb. 20, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> The correlation between the difference in means and the pooled standard deviation (over both parties) is  $-0.72$ . For Democrats, the correlation between the difference in party means and intraparty standard deviation is  $-0.77$ ; for Republicans, this correlation is  $-0.51$ . All three correlations are significant at the 0.001 level.



**Figure 1.1. Partisan Means and Variance in the US House**

Notes: The first dimension of the DW-NOMINATE scores is used throughout in Figure 1.1. The horizontal axes in Figure 1.1 and similar figures throughout the book are indexed by the election year of each Congress; for example, the 117th Congress, labeled 2020, served from 2021 through 2022. House members whose parties were coded from 100 to 199 were classified as Democrats, those coded between 200 and 299 as Republicans.

candidates of opposing parties at the district level. Party strategies for electing the US House must accommodate races in numerous Congressional districts, each with its own political makeup and district-specific ideology. National party constraints motivated by national policy-seeking goals, when imposed on the campaign positions of local district candidates, may conflict with the interests of party candidates who feel the need to temper the national party position by shifting to be more representative of the district. In later chapters we will consider the trade-offs of candidates and parties in judging how to balance between appealing to their base and seeking to win the support of the typical voter in the district.

### **1.3. Explaining the Growth of Polarization in Congress**

How did we get to where we are now? Various explanations have been offered for increasing polarization that are specific to the past 50 years (following a decline in polarization in the previous half century). In the Appendix to this chapter, we discuss research concerning several suggested contributing factors—including income inequality, immigration, racial and ethnic divisions, and party leadership structure—that may have influenced the rise and fall of polarization and, in particular, triggered polarization trends during the past half century. Moreover, the growth of talk radio and politicized cable news channels—accompanied by declining audiences for the major TV networks—and the rise of tweets and other social media have led to a “silozation” of political communication that reinforces polarization to a remarkable degree. In sum, in seeking to explain polarization, we are blessed with a superabundance of forces and events to credit or blame.

While there is a debate about how much of the polarization we see is only at the elite and activist level, and a related debate about the extent to which voter polarization lags or mirrors elite polarization, what can be said with confidence is that, over the past half century, activists, party officials, and other power brokers have intentionally moved American politics toward what once were called “ideologically responsible parties.” Rosenfeld (2017) notes that in the decades following the 1950 APSA Report, activists and politicians in the middle ranks of American politics, who had reason to think that forging disciplined, programmatically distinct parties would solve endemic problems in American politics, intentionally began the movement toward responsible parties. He recounts how, by effectively drawing new

party lines across a wide array of issues, these activists helped to catalyze a partisan resurgence, first among Democrats, then later among Republicans. Slowly, these newly responsible parties became identified with opposing issue bundles and became dominated not by non-ideological bosses but by issue-oriented interest groups that imposed their own exacting discipline, and more and more polarization.

Furthermore, during the second half of the 20th century, party control was influenced by the replacement of many office-oriented professional political leaders by amateur activists and moneyed interests operating on their own (Rosenfeld, 2017). Both of these groups frequently had a deep commitment to policy change and relatively extreme views. For example, Morris Fiorina et al. (2005) quotes Aaron Wildavsky (1965) about “[purists’] emphasis on internal criteria for decision, on what they believe ‘deep down inside’; their rejection of compromise; their lack of orientation toward winning; their stress on the style and purity of decision—integrity, consistency, adherence to internal norms.” In addition, think tanks and partisan media outlets, particularly on the right, have been heavily funded with private money, with the aim of influencing party policy for the long term (Mayer, 2016; Fagan, 2022). Thus, movement toward ideologically distinct parties can be intentional, fostered by activists with strong policy views who at times wish to implement extreme policies or by ideologically motivated media for whom controversy increases audiences and who find it profitable to demonize the other side.

In this book, however, we focus on less well understood processes that reinforce polarization but that operate in a “behind-the-scenes” fashion, and to which even the involved actors may be oblivious. Specifically, we focus on linkages between the level of party discipline on Congressional candidates, forces that affect voter party loyalties, the influence of activists within each party, the differences between the candidates of the two parties at the constituency level, and polarization in legislative voting patterns. While a huge amount has been written about polarization both at the mass and the elite level, we believe that our approach, in which we view polarization as a complex system with many moving parts, provides original insights involving extensive modifications of the classic Downsian model of party competition (which we discuss later). In particular, we focus on the reciprocal relationship between the level of polarization in Congress and the nature of political competition in US House elections at the district level.

But we also show why hyper-polarization can be expected to facilitate the development of extreme partisan loyalty, and vice versa. Perhaps the epitome

of this development occurred in the presidential elections of 2016 and 2020. Ezra Klein, in his book *Why We're Polarized* (2020), asserts: “The fact that voters ultimately treated Trump as if he were just another Republican speaks to the enormous weight party polarization now exerts on our politics—a weight so heavy that it can take an election as bizarre as 2016 and jam the result into the same grooves as Romney’s contest with Obama or Bush’s race against Kerry.” Compounding party loyalty is *negative partisanship*—that is, disliking and even detesting the other party, its office holders, and indeed its supporters. When voters are loyal to their party and strongly dislike the other party, extremist candidates can more easily be elected.

Alienation from mainstream ideology and increased activism by ordinary voters and wealthy individuals on the extremes bring about greater reliance on the respective blocs or bases that form in part from these previously alienated voters. The more the two parties separate, furthermore, the more the activists of the out-party react to the extremism of the in-party, and the less willing these opposition activists become to offer moderate candidates. The out-party mean becomes more extreme, while the in-party, relying on its safe majorities, dares to implement extreme policies. Out-party activists demand ideological purity as a litmus test for its candidates so as to combat the “evil” in-party. In turn, the in-party activists—because they are already winning—see little reason to forsake ideological purity and seek to expel moderates from their own ranks.<sup>5</sup>

Also, as Fiorina et al. (2005, 5) argue, even if voters have not become more polarized in terms of developing more extreme views, “partisans have become better sorted into the parties.” Such sorting has occurred in part because of activists’ insistence on issues, on party responsibility, and on ideological purism, so that catchall parties cease to be viable. Associated with the growing strength of ideological activists are other developments that often lead to more divergent party nominees, such as more open, primary-driven, candidate-centric presidential and Congressional nominating processes, accentuated by the reforms in party primaries initiated by the McGovern-Fraser Commission following the 1968 elections.

As the parties move further apart, policy polarization at the elite level reinforces tendencies for the electorate to polarize, as sorting mechanisms

<sup>5</sup> This certainly is one element of party politics in the era of Trump, but we had already seen this tendency with Tea Party primary competition against those Republicans seen as not conservative enough.

shift voters into the party to which they are ideologically closest.<sup>6</sup> In particular, voters whose policy attitudes on given issues are not that well anchored tend to adopt views on those issues that are consistent with the reference groups and the information sources to which they are most attuned, including leaders in the party with which they identify. This leads to increased correlation among voters across multiple issue dimensions (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008, Abramowitz, 2010, 2015) such that not just party leaders and ideologues but ordinary voters develop stronger partisan identities, since there are no longer crosscutting cleavages that foster split-ticket voting (cf. Glazer and Grofman, 1989). Such developments feed on each other, generating self-reinforcing positive feedback.

In the model of party competition and its consequences that we offer, as party delegations in Congress polarize along ideological lines, national party discipline and expectations, as well as the power of activists, applied at the district level, force candidates further and further away from the preferences of the median or typical voter in their constituencies. Change in the ideological location of each party's Congressional delegation is generated by, and then reinforces, differentiation in the ideological locations of the candidates of the two major parties in each constituency.

We make no claim that the electoral and structural factors on which we focus in this book are the only forces that impel polarization or that exacerbate its consequences. The alignment of partisan affiliation with personal identity—along racial, ethnic, class, religious, or educational lines—has served to buttress party allegiance against the influence of policy arguments and indeed against information and facts themselves.<sup>7</sup> Significant as these factors are, their analysis is not the focus of this book.<sup>8</sup> We focus instead on institutional factors that underlie the rise of polarization but may be less visible—factors that are tied to the existence of single-seat political competition under plurality—which we believe will give a fuller understanding of the rise of polarization, its perpetuation, and perhaps its eventual reversal. Our

<sup>6</sup> Still, whatever the level of polarization in the electorate, there is no dispute that it is not as severe as polarization among party officeholders (cf. the recent “culture wars” debate about whether it is voters or just party elites that are polarized).

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, at both the elite and mass level, partisan polarization arises not just about ideology per se but also about “beliefs” concerning facts that should be indisputable (see, e.g., Barker and Marietta, 2020), most prominently the baseless claim that Biden's election to the presidency in 2020 was the result of election fraud. We do not deal directly with this “joker in the deck,” but rather limit ourselves to ideological nonconvergence, although the two are clearly highly correlated.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Glazer, Grofman, and Owen (1998) for a discussion of the role of race in realignment.

approach allows us to address the puzzle of why we get a pattern of *steadily increasing* polarization. By proposing a clear institutional mechanism that fosters party separation and legislative polarization, this approach provides clues as to how the increasing polarization trend might be reversed, clues that augment previous recommendations such as those of McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) or Putnam and Garrett (2020).

#### **1.4. How Does Polarization in Congress Relate to Candidate Polarization at the District Level?**

At the heart of this book is a dynamic model that links polarization in the US Congress to the nature of electoral competition at the district level. Our argument is based on the proposition that the positions candidates of a given party can offer the voters in their constituencies are constrained by the national expectations of their party, as well as by the ideology of the constituency. When this constraint is relatively weak, as it was in the middle of the past century, Republican candidates, for example, can be competitive in relatively liberal districts, balancing and hence moderating their overall Congressional delegation; similarly, Democrats can be competitive in relatively conservative districts. Relatively loose constraints during the middle-century era allowed quite conservative Democrats to continue to win Congressional elections, many in the South, despite a national party position that was distant from voter preferences in those districts. Similarly, relaxed constraints by the Republican Party once permitted the repeated election of relatively liberal Republicans such as Jacob Javits in the Senate and Silvio Conte in the House.

Consequently, when restraint is lax, as was typical during the middle of the 20th century, the ideologies of the party delegations overlap and the gap between the means of party delegations is relatively small—that is, polarization is averted. But, when the constraint is tight, as it is now, then the gap between parties widens. In fact, today, when the allowable tolerance for deviance from the party position has narrowed, even a previously popular and respected party leader such as Liz Cheney can be removed from her party leadership position and rejected in her constituency for being out of step with the party.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “GOP Ousts Cheney from Her Leadership Position over Her Criticism of Trump,” NPR, May 12, 2021; “Wyoming GOP Votes to Stop Recognizing Cheney as a Republican,” NPR, Nov. 15, 2021.

The strength of party constraints also affects intraparty variation, with tighter constraints corresponding to ideologically concentrated party delegations. Hence, polarization at the Congressional level is characterized by concentrated and ideologically widely separated party delegations, whereas during unpolarized periods party delegations are each broadly distributed and overlap.

In turn, when Congressional delegations are highly polarized, each projects a focused national image that is sharply distinct from that of the opposing party. This sets the stage for each of the two parties to espouse extreme views and be relatively intolerant of deviations from the party position. We concur with Persily (2015b, 4) when he observes, “In today’s Congress, it would appear that not only are the parties far apart on the issues but also that the ideological distance is matched by a widespread intensity of belief on a host of issues that might not have been seen as so fundamental and defining in previous eras.”

Thus, ideological polarization at the national party level typically leads to substantial ideological differentiation between candidates at the district level, which influences which party’s candidate is most likely to win in any given constituency. Success in the districts, which is also affected by the ideological distribution of voters in the respective constituencies, in turn shapes the polarization between the parties in the next Congress. Insofar as the national ideological position of the party reflects that of the party’s Congressional members, divergence of those members implies that the anchors for the national party constraints likewise diverge. These anchors then drag the policy platforms of each party’s winners yet further away from the preferences of swing voters within their districts. These forces generate a dynamic interaction, or positive feedback loop, between district and Congressional politics. Thus, over time—until checked or reversed—*polarization begets polarization*.

Either one or both parties may be induced to take extreme stands by, for example, efforts of policy activists or power brokers to generate a more “responsible” party, that is, a party which is accountable to the policies of its strongest supporters. As extreme activists become more important in influencing the direction of the parties, the party bases become more polarized. As we will show in Chapter 5, if, for any reason, the latter conditions develop beyond a threshold specified by the analysis, optimal party strategies begin rapidly diverging from centrist toward more extreme ideological positions, with these positions representing the parties’ own bases rather than the overall electorate. Or to put it more succinctly, *once a polarization threshold is*