The political parties in Congress are as polarized as they have been since the early 1900s. This book examines more than 30 years of congressional history to understand how it is that the Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill have become so divided. It finds that two steps were critical for this development. First, the respective parties’ constituencies became more politically and ideologically aligned. Second, members, in turn, ceded more power to their party leaders, who implemented procedures more frequently and with greater consequence. In fact, almost the entire rise in party polarization can be accounted for in the increasing frequency of and polarization on procedures used during the legislative process.

Sean M. Theriault received his Ph.D. in political science from Stanford University in 2001. An Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin, he has received numerous teaching awards. His first book, The Power of the People: Congressional Competition, Media Attention, and Public Retribution, was published in 2005. He has published a number of articles on a variety of subjects including congressional retirement, the Louisiana Purchase, and redistricting commissions. Professor Theriault resides with his partner, Anthony Bristol, in Houston and Austin, Texas.
Party Polarization in Congress

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## Contents

*Acknowledgments*  

1  Party Polarization in the U.S. Congress  

**PART I: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR EXPLaining PARTY POLARIZATION**  

2  A Brief History of Party Polarization  

3  Explanations for Party Polarization  

**PART II: CONSTITUENCY CHANGE**  

4  Redistricting  

5  The Political and Geographic Sorting of Constituents  

6  Extremism of Party Activists  

**PART III: INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**  

7  Connecting Constituency Change to Institutional Change  

8  The Interaction in the Legislative Process  

9  The Link between the House and the Senate  

10  Procedural Polarization in the U.S. Congress  

*Bibliography*  

*Index*
Acknowledgments

My fascination with party polarization began in 1993 when I was a staff assistant for the Legislative Counsel in the U.S. House of Representatives. Our office was an island in a sea of partisan discord. Stridently nonpartisan, yet under the auspices of the Speaker, the office is responsible for turning legislative ideas into legal language for both Democrats and Republicans. Frequently, the lawyers in the office would scribe a major legislative program with one side in the morning and the tools for its destruction with the other side in the afternoon. Having nonpartisan experts drafting the proposals that will work their way into the U.S. Code provides all Americans with uniformity that would be impossible if each party had its own set of drafters. Even though I left the office in September 1994, my friends in the office say that it is as nonpartisan as it was the day I left.

The office was the perfect place for me to land after my graduation from the University of Richmond. I have always been more comfortable in a family than I have been on a team. Families, much like the Legislative Counsel’s Office, figure out a way to put their best face forward. Of course, disagreements occur, but they are hashed out behind closed doors and not in public. Teams, on the other hand, compete and fight in the light of day. While the teams on Capitol Hill embarrass themselves in a multitude of different episodes (some of which are recounted in this book), the Legislative Counsel’s Office continues to perform its duties and responsibilities to both the warring teams
and the American people. To be clear from the outset, polarized parties need not necessarily be warring parties. It so happens that in the current context, those terms are highly correlated, though we could certainly have responsible parties without the adolescent behavior that has accompanied the polarized parties of today.

This book, I am proud to say, has been a family effort (though I have formed teams – if but in my own mind – against some mean reviewers over the course of this project!). First, and foremost, I must thank my “kids.” Since my last Ph.D. year at Stanford, I have come to benefit from hundreds of undergraduates who have been actively engaged in this research project. Listing the students, here, is perhaps my proudest professional accomplishment: Ginger Turner, Court Chillingworth, Anthony Lee, Michael Riemschneider, Krista Anderson, Carolyn Liu, Nathan Hess, Jonathan Ma, Wesley Yeo, Joe Kanada, James Aldredge, Sean Haynes, Stephanie Portillo, Pam Britton, Corey Herrick, Keith Rainwater, Jeremy Brown, Chris Kilmer, Travis Ridgley, Renee Castillo, Chris Ledel, Kevin Robnett, Brent Chandler, Angie Long, Roxanna Rocha, Lars Clemensen, Leah Mayo, Trae Schultz, Daniela Diaz, Adam Miller, Mark Shanks, Amy Ehlert, Kevin Moczygemba, Chrissy Stegemoller, Liz Hanks, Anne Moore, Colleen Thompson, Hunter Harris, Sara Mueller, Aaron Wood, Nada Antoun, Katie King, Roxanna Rocha, James Aldredge, Chris Ledel, Jodie Rosello, Pam Britton, Chuck Miller, Jessica Rowland, Renee Castillo, Regina Moore, Micah Royer, Brian Chang, Stephanie Noboa, Jonathan Skates, Nikki Iles, Audra Tafoya, Graham Keefe, Andrea Eckelman, Jennifer Kirkham, Stephen McArthur, Lance Gooden, Karen Kolb, Brandon Oliver, Tracey Johnson, Enrique Marquez, Lisa Penn, Lauren Kincke, Jonathan Bartov, Ian Bates, Katie Clemens, Mamta Desai, Trent Engledow, Melody Fisher, Jon Kim, Lindsey McPheeters, Aaron Plumlee, Mark Sanchez, Ella Schwartz, Mark Wimmer, Josh Campbell, Chaille Jolink, Adam Rosenfeld, Nick Bacarisse, Matthew Bessman, Ana Bradshaw, Jordan Leu, Sandra Menjivar, Rachael Klopfenstein, Ross Ziev, Addie Bryant, Grace Garcia, Bret Schenewerk, Carolyn White, Dana Scott, Andrew Carls, Sean Kilkenny, Jeff Asher, Carl Holshouser, Joshua Huck, Katy Quinton, Angel Alfaro, Zac Evans, Brent Chaney, Patrick Luff, Megan Morrow, Matthew Allen, Stephen Myers, Jack Gumpert, Chris Jackson, Edward Cloutman, Ann Gore, R.D. Leyva, Kedron Touvell,
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This project is better because of the advice I have been given by my extended family in my own Government Department at the University of Texas at Austin and in political science departments throughout the United States. Departments at Texas A&M, Houston, Southern Methodist, Rice, Austin Community College, Nebraska, Michigan, Stanford, Wisconsin, Emory, and Oklahoma heard various parts or earlier versions of this manuscript. A weeklong seminar, under the direction of Dave Rohde and John Aldrich, at Duke University provided a thorough vetting of the manuscript. Numerous friends and mentors have read, reread, and rereread numerous versions of this manuscript, including Roger Davidson, Barbara Sinclair, Jon Bond, Sarah Binder, Dave Lewis, Dan Palazzolo, Randy Strahan, Andy Karch, John Sides, Kathryn Pearson, Jen Lawless, Wendy Schiller, Joe Copper, Frances Lee, Scott Adler, Jacob Hacker, Greg Koger, Dave Rohde, John Aldrich, Mike Brady, Brendan Nyhan, John Coleman, Tim Nokken, Liz Gerber, Barry Weingast, Eric Schickler, Kurt Weyland, John Hibbing, Marc Hetherington, Glen Krutz, Harold Stanley, and three classes of Texas undergraduates in my Party Polarization courses and one class of Montana undergraduates in Greg Koger’s Political Parties class. Alas, I have benefited from a multitude of chairs, discussants, and fellow panelists at numerous conferences and a plethora of anonymous reviewers; even the reviewers on the other team helped to make the manuscript better when I begrudgingly followed their advice. Paul Sniderman once again helped me navigate the treacherous waters of book publishing. Eric Crahan, at Cambridge University
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