Introduction

The sharp rise in partisan polarization in the United States Congress has been one of the most prominent topics of academic debate for the past decade. The ideological gulf between the Republican and Democratic parties has widened in almost every election since the 1970s. Members of Congress are now first and foremost partisans who adhere to the party line, and the distance between the two parties is at a record high (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). The absence of moderates from congressional office today is particularly striking from a historical perspective, because just 40 years ago more than half of members of Congress were at the ideological center. The hollowing out of the political center has had a deleterious impact on the policymaking process, and the lack of compromise and negotiation has impeded legislative action on a variety of pressing issues, including immigration, criminal justice reform, and paid employment leave.

Equally troubling as the increase in polarization is the nature of contemporary partisan conflict. The divides on roll-call votes reveal only part of the story. There is another dimension of political conflict that is related to, but distinct from, ideological polarization. This is what Lee (2009) calls partisan bickering and what Theriault (2013) refers to as partisan warfare. Theriault (2013, 11) writes, "The warfare dimension taps into the strategies that go beyond defeating your opponents to humiliating them, go beyond questioning your opponents' judgment to questioning their motives, and go beyond fighting the good legislative fight to destroying the institution and the legislative process." The gravity of the current situation stems from the huge ideological disparity between the parties

coupled with the partisan warfare that pervades the congressional environment. One of the more visible effects of the political brinksmanship in Washington occurred in 2011 when the debacle over the debt ceiling resulted in the first-ever downgrade of the U.S. credit rating by Standard & Poor's.

Unsurprisingly, very few Americans are satisfied with the current state of congressional politics. Although voters have long been known to hate Congress but love their own congressman (Fenno 1978), congressional approval ratings have plummeted in recent years. The number of Americans who approved of Congress's job performance sank to a record low of 9 percent in 2013. Thirty years ago, these ratings were three to four times higher than they are today. Gallup has tracked public evaluations of Congress since 1974, and prior to 2008, congressional approval had fallen below 20 percent only twice, in 1979 and 1992 (Riffkin 2014). Now around 80 percent of Americans consistently disapprove of congressional performance. Furthermore, in 2013, the top reason that Americans gave for their disapproval was partisan bickering and gridlock (28 percent); another 21 percent cited Congress's failure to get anything done, and 11 percent said that Congress puts politics ahead of the country (Saad 2013). Notably, these figures are low among both Republicans and Democrats, whereas historically those who support the majority party have had a much more favorable opinion of Congress (Riffkin 2014). In short, the public is not happy with Congress, it is not happy with the partisanship and gridlock in Washington, and the unhappiness is distributed across Republicans as well as Democrats.

Those who bemoan the hyperpartisanship in Congress have not sat by quietly. Three culprits are widely believed to be contributing to partisan polarization: gerrymandering, big money in politics, and primary election systems. Many of the recent policy reforms have attempted to address these issues head on, although they have been largely ineffective to date and polarization has continued to grow unabated. The basic logic of the gerrymandering hypothesis is that districts have become increasingly safe, electoral competition has declined, and only conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats can win in conservative and liberal districts. However, the academic consensus is that gerrymandering matters anywhere from a little bit to not at all (McCarty et al. 2006, 2009; Carson et al. 2007; Theriault 2008; Abramowitz 2010; see Barber and McCarty 2015 for a review). First, Senate and at-large congressional districts have experienced rising polarization without redistricting. Moreover, McCarty et al. (2009) find that polarization is due to the differences in

how Republicans and Democrats represent moderate districts, rather than an increase in the number of extreme partisan districts.

Removing big money from politics also does not appear to have a diminishing effect on legislative polarization. Studies of state legislatures show either no relationship between public election funding and legislative polarization or that the public financing of candidates actually leads to more, not less, polarization. For example, Masket and Miller (2014) demonstrate that state legislators who accept full public funding of their campaigns are no more or less extreme than their traditionally funded colleagues. Hall (2015), on the other hand, finds a positive relationship between public funding and state legislative polarization: states with public election funding have higher, not lower, levels of polarization. Yet what both analyses demonstrate is that public funding does not produce *less* polarized political systems. Thus, as Masket and Miller (2015) write, "Reformers looking to curb polarization via campaign finance reform should consider looking at ideas other than public funding."

Some of the most surprising findings concern the impact of partisan primaries on polarization. The logic is again compelling: primary voters favor ideologically pure candidates and pull candidates toward the extremes. The party primary argument has been so powerful that almost all who seek congressional reform advocate changes to the primary system (e.g., Bipartisan Policy Center 2014), yet scholars have simultaneously struggled to find direct linkages between primaries and polarization. For one, the evidence that extremists fare better in primaries is mixed (Brady et al. 2007; Hirano et al. 2010; Hall and Snyder 2015). In addition, Hirano et al. (2010) show that the introduction of primary elections, the level of primary turnout, and the threat of primary competition are not associated with partisan polarization in roll-call voting. Differences in primary rules also seem to provide few answers. Closed primaries, or those in which only party members can vote, do not produce more extreme candidates than open primaries (McGhee et al. 2014; Rogowski and Langella 2014; but see Gerber and Morton 1998). Sides and Vavreck (2013) attribute these collective dead ends to the fact that primary voters look similar on many measures to other voters within their party (see also Geer 1988; Norrander 1989). They conclude, "Polarization does not seem to emanate from voters at any stage of the electoral process" (Sides and Vavreck 2013, 11).

Additional evidence on the limited impact of primaries on polarization comes from recent reforms. Most notably, the implementation of the "top-two primary" in California in 2012 was predicted to increase voter

turnout and thereby diminish the effect of extreme voters on candidate selection. The top-two primary was widely expected to help moderate candidates, although subsequent analyses suggest that this goal was perhaps too optimistic. Moderates fared no better under the top-two primary than they would have in closed primaries (Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2016), and if anything, California lawmakers took more extreme positions after the adoption of the top-two primary (Kousser, Phillips, and Shor 2017). In sum, there is little indication that any of the recent policy reforms have resulted in the election of more moderate candidates.

This book seeks to point reformers in a different direction and shift the discussion to the ideological makeup of the candidate pool. Indeed, one reason these policies have been less successful than anticipated is that moderates have opted out of congressional politics. The chapters that follow describe why they have done so and why the gulf between the parties is unlikely to diminish on its own. The emphasis on candidate supply reconciles the puzzle of how polarization has continued to increase despite the enactment of recent reforms: in order for a moderate to be elected, there must be a moderate candidate for voters to choose. Regardless of who draws congressional districts, who funds congressional candidates, or who votes in congressional elections, if the only individuals who run for congressional office come from the ideological extremes, it is difficult to see how polarization will fade any time soon. Those who seek to counteract partisan polarization must consider how to encourage ideological moderates to run for Congress, and reformers could aid in this endeavor by recruiting and supporting moderate candidates. At the very least, if we are serious about bridging the gap between the parties, the absence of moderates from the pool of congressional candidates needs to be part of the conversation.

1

The Choices Have Changed

In 2012, longtime Republican Senator Olympia Snowe announced her retirement from congressional office. She had served for more than three decades in both the U.S. House and Senate. During her tenure in Congress, Snowe was the face of the ideological center. She was no stranger to casting the swing vote, and she deviated from the party line on many occasions and on the most controversial issues, including abortion, gay rights, and health care. Yet the very attributes that made Olympia Snowe such a respected, admired, and even iconic legislator, the very qualities that would eventually set her apart from almost all her colleagues, would also be the reason she called it quits. Snowe would have sailed to reelection, but in her retirement announcement, she expressed a different concern over how productive another term would be. She blamed hyperpartisanship and the "my way or the highway" ideologies in Congress as the singular reason for her exit from office. The prognosis for bipartisanship is even bleaker when we look at the traditional pathway to congressional office. Not only are ideological moderates leaving Congress, but state legislators like Olympia Snowe who are in the pipeline to higher office now overwhelmingly decide to pass on a congressional career.

The central argument of this book is that moderates are opting out of the congressional candidate pool, further exacerbating the ideological gulf between the parties in Congress. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats are outsiders in both parties, and the personal and professional benefits of congressional service are too low for them to run. Just a few decades ago, those in the ideological middle comprised half of the House chamber, and they were highly influential voting blocs. Sizeable numbers of Democrats were conservative on social and economic

issues, and they sided with the Republicans in their support for tax cuts and defense spending. Liberal Republicans were a prominent wing of the GOP, and they united with the Democrats on environmental regulation, labor protection, and social welfare policy. Moderates had a say in the policymaking process, and their votes were often the deciding factor in whether legislation would pass or fail. But for liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats today, the value of congressional office has diminished as they have become more at odds with the rest of their party delegation. It is increasingly difficult for moderates to achieve their policy goals and advance within the party or chamber, and they have fewer like-minded colleagues to work and interact with in office. Although the political center has long been deemed a coveted position in the legislature, it is now a lonely and lowly place to be.

The consequence is that partisan polarization in Congress has become self-reinforcing. The vanishing of moderates first began because of a variety of geographical and partisan changes that occurred in the American electorate. Some moderates lost their reelection bids; others retired from office. As both parties became more homogeneous and their centers of gravity shifted toward the extremes, the nature of legislative service changed for those in the ideological middle. Their political leverage waned with the passage of each election cycle, and congressional service became less and less rewarding, as well as less pleasant, for liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. In short, the rise in polarization and the hollowing out of the political center has discouraged ideological moderates from running for and remaining in Congress. These many, many individual decisions to abstain from congressional politics have important implications for the persistence of partisan polarization, the nature of congressional representation, and the quality of American democracy.

Candidate emergence has received only minimal attention from polarization scholars, but it is crucial for understanding the makeup of those who are ultimately elected. The micro-level decision to run influences the choices that are available to voters and determines who is eligible to win. This book introduces the concept of party fit to explain why moderates are not putting their hats into the ring. Party fit is the idea that ideological conformity with the party influences the value of running for and serving in political office. Legislators' degree of party fit matters for their ability to shape the policy agenda, succeed within the chamber, and forge bonds with fellow members of their party. Although the reelection goal captures part of what members want (e.g., Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974),

the argument here is that there is more to being a member of Congress than winning elections. Legislators are members of a party team who are expected to promote the party agenda and tear down the other side (Lee 2009). Party fit matters for whether candidates want to be on the team.

The chapters explore two processes at the candidate level that are shaping aggregate patterns of party change: the decision to run for higher office among state legislators in the congressional pipeline and the decision to run for reelection among members of Congress. First, I find that moderate state legislators are less likely to run for Congress than conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. In addition, the probability of running for Congress soars among extreme state legislators who face open seats, and because the vast majority of newly elected members enter through open seats, these individuals are a propelling force behind changes in polarization. Second, I find that moderate members of Congress are less likely to seek reelection than their conservative Republican and liberal Democratic counterparts. The liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats of yesteryear who worked across the aisle on social and economic issues alike are opting out of congressional politics, and conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats have taken their place. The entrance of ideologues into the candidate pool, particularly in races where they are most likely to win, and the exit of moderates from the candidate pool have exacerbated partisan polarization in Congress.

The conclusions provide important insights into our understanding of representation in the contemporary context. In the mid-twentieth century, the two parties were diverse coalitions of legislators, representation was highly localized, and members of Congress were best described as ambassadors of their district. Legislators focused on where they, rather than their party, stood on issues and how they, rather than their party, voted on policies. Members engaged in a variety of activities to build name recognition among their constituents: they took positions, claimed credit, and brought home the bacon (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). But that model of representation has become increasingly outdated. Partisan attachments in the electorate have grown stronger, fewer and fewer voters cross party lines, and the incumbency advantage has declined markedly (Bartels 2000; Abramowitz and Webster 2015; Jacobson 2015). It now sounds more plausible to say that no theoretical treatment of Congress that *does not* posit parties as analytic units will go very far. The model of representation that currently characterizes American politics is very much a partisan one.

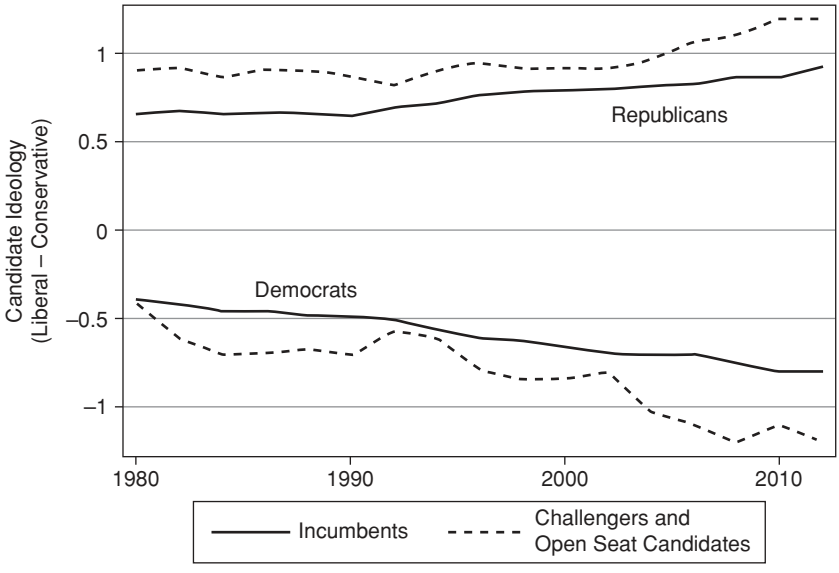

FIGURE 1.1. Mean ideology of U.S. House candidates, 1980–2012
Source: Campaign finance scores; Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (Bonica 2014).

Patterns of Candidate Emergence over Time

Recent data advances allow us to examine how the ideology of congressional candidates has changed between 1980 and 2012. Bonica (2014) uses campaign contribution patterns to estimate campaign finance scores (CFscores) for a wide range of political actors, including members of Congress, state legislators, interest groups, and individual donors. Importantly, these estimates are available for winning and losing candidates, and they provide a more complete picture of the supply of congressional candidates during this 30-year stretch.[1] Figure 1.1 shows the average CFscores of candidates who ran for the U.S. House between 1980 and 2012, broken down into incumbents and nonincumbents. All candidates have increasingly come from the extremes, and the candidates who ran in 2012 were significantly more polarized than those who ran in 1980.

[1] The Bonica (2014) measures are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. The CFscores are measures of the preferences of candidates' donors, rather than direct measures of politicians' beliefs. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to these measures as ideology, but they are more accurately understood as a proxy for candidate ideology. Nevertheless, they are the only available proxy, and they are also a very good one, for the ideology of congressional winners as well as losers during this time period.

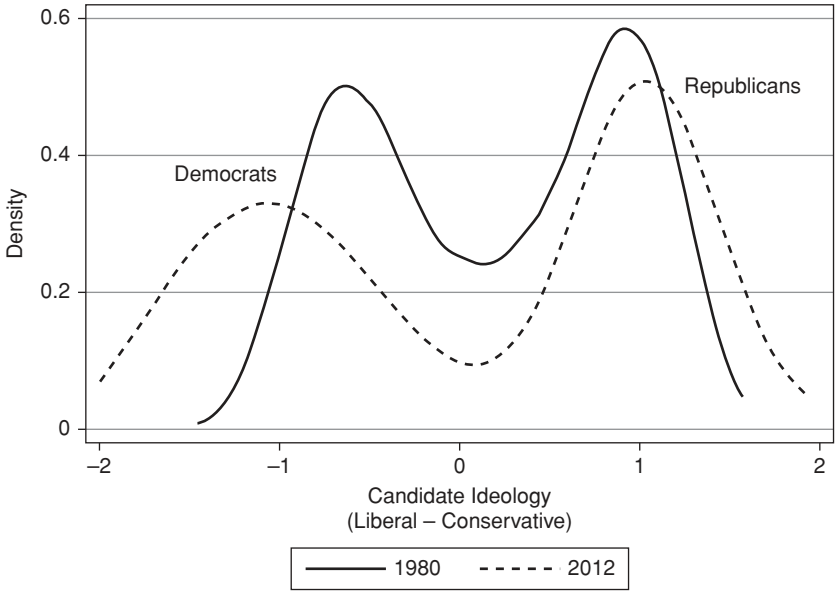

FIGURE 1.2. Ideological distributions of U.S. House candidates, 1980 vs. 2012
Source: CFscores (Bonica 2014).

In fact, for both Republicans and Democrats, the ideological distance between those who ran in 1980 and 2012 is much greater than the distance between incumbents and nonincumbents in most years. In addition, nonincumbent candidates are further apart ideologically than incumbents in every election cycle, which is consistent with the evidence that replacements are responsible for much of the rise in polarization (Theriault 2006). The abstention of moderates from congressional politics has contributed to what Bafumi and Herron (2010) call "leapfrog representation." Member replacement patterns today consist of extremists taking the place of extremists, and moderates are left with a dearth of representation in Congress.

Similarly, Figure 1.2 displays the ideological distributions of candidates who ran in 1980 and those who ran in 2012. The distribution is bimodal for both years, and we see clear ideological differences between Republican and Democratic candidates (see also Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). But it is also evident that the candidate distributions have changed dramatically over time. The political center has been hollowed out over the last three decades. Republican candidates come increasingly from the conservative end of the spectrum, and Democratic

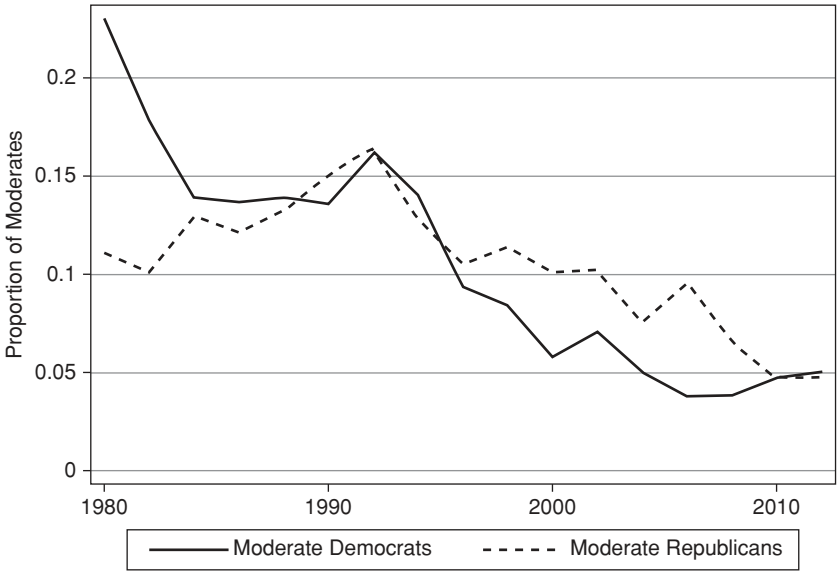

FIGURE 1.3. Ideological moderates as a proportion of U.S. House candidates, 1980–2012
Source: CFscores (Bonica 2014).

candidates come increasingly from the liberal end. Very few candidates are staking out the ideological middle.

Another way to examine these trends is to show how the proportion of moderates in the candidate pool changed during this time. Figure 1.3 shows the percentage of liberal Republican candidates in the Republican candidate pool and the percentage of conservative Democratic candidates in the Democratic candidate pool from 1980 to 2012. These are Republican candidates who resemble Olympia Snowe, the veteran moderate from Maine who retired in 2012, and Democratic candidates who resemble John Tanner, a longtime representative from Tennessee and founder of the moderate Blue Dog Coalition, who retired in 2010. The Blue Dog Coalition was created in 1995 by legislators who felt they had been "choked blue" by their colleagues from the left. Like moderate Republicans, Blue Dogs are often at odds with their party on both social and economic issues. In recent years, they have defected from the Democratic Party on key votes such as the Affordable Care Act, the economic stimulus package, and cap and trade legislation (Beckel 2010). Although moderate Democrats like Tanner constituted more than 20 percent of Democratic candidates in 1980, they made up only 5 percent of the Democratic pool