

Centennial Honors College
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ABSTRACT

Major: Political Science

Podium

Faculty Mentor(s): Jonathan Day

Partisan Polarization in Congress: Historical Trends, Causes, and Implications for Governance

Piper Hill

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the escalating partisan polarization in the U.S. Congress, examining its historical evolution, underlying causes, and profound implications for American governance. Over recent decades, an ideological split has emerged, characterized by the Republican Party's shift towards more conservative stances and the Democratic Party's lean towards liberalism. This polarization, fueled by demographic shifts, media influence, and electoral strategies, has significantly impacted legislative processes and policy outcomes, while eroding public trust in democratic institutions.

The study traces polarization back to shifts post-Civil War, noting a marked increase from the late 1970s, further accelerated during the Reagan era. It explores how the disappearance of the political middle ground has led to legislative stalemates, complicating governance even under unified government conditions. Through an examination of demographic changes, the paper highlights how the racial and ethnic composition of party constituencies has evolved, influencing party ideologies and contributing to polarization.

Furthermore, the research delves into the media's role in fostering echo chambers that reinforce polarization, alongside the effects of gerrymandering and candidate-centered electoral systems that prioritize local interests over collective goods. The paper discusses the implications of polarization for congressional approval and legitimacy, illustrating how negative public perceptions are linked to electoral outcomes and further entrench partisan divides.

Concluding, the paper argues for the necessity of bipartisan cooperation and the addressing of legislative stalemates to enhance democratic governance and restore public trust in Congress, presenting a critical reflection on the challenges and potential pathways forward in an era of deep ideological divisions.