

**OBAMA'S BURDEN**  
**Governing in Polarized Times**

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On December 31, 2012, Obama told his base in a video message, “When I take the oath of office this month, I’ll be as determined as ever.” “Just like four years ago, winning an election won’t bring about the change we seek on its own. It only gives us the chance to make that change. What we fought for in 2012, we’ve got to fight just as hard for in 2013.”<sup>1</sup>

The president was correct. His reelection did little to improve his chances for winning the policy changes he and his supporters desired. From the beginning of his term, he faltered on gun control, sequestration, and other important issues. In this paper, I explain why the president found it so difficult to govern and why his frustrations are unlikely to diminish.

I do so by focusing on the foundation of leadership success, the opportunity structure within which presidents attempt to make policy changes and thus leave their legacy. Rather than the president’s rhetorical eloquence or bargaining skills, it is the environment in which he operates that largely determines whether he will succeed or fail in obtaining public and congressional support for his initiatives. Thus, we must approach a presidency from a strategic perspective to evaluate the president’s opportunities for change.<sup>2</sup>

## **Strategic Position Regarding Public Opinion**

Public support is a key political resource, and modern presidents have typically sought public support for themselves and their policies that they could leverage to obtain backing for their proposals in Congress. It is natural for a president, basking in the glow of an electoral victory, to focus on creating, rather than exploiting, opportunities for change. After all, if he convinced voters and party leaders to support his candidacy – and just won the biggest prize in American politics by doing so, why should he not be able to convince the public or members of Congress to support his policies? Thus, presidents may not focus on evaluating existing possibilities when they think they can create their own.

Yet it is a mistake for presidents to assume they can lead the public. There is nothing in the historical record to support such a belief, and there are long-term forces that work against presidential leadership of the public.<sup>3</sup> Adopting strategies for governing that are prone to failure waste rather than create opportunities,<sup>4</sup> so it is critically important for presidents to assess accurately the potential for obtaining public support.

What is the president’s strategic position regarding public opinion? Does it support the direction in which the president would like to move? Is there a mandate from the voters in support of specific policies? Is there a broad public predisposition for government activism? Are opposition party identifiers open to supporting the president’s initiatives?

### **Mandate**

New presidents traditionally claim a mandate from the people, because the most effective means of setting the terms of debate and overcoming opposition is the perception of an electoral mandate, an impression that the voters want to see the winner’s programs implemented. Indeed, major changes in policy, as in 1933, 1965, and 1981, rarely occur in the absence of such perceptions.

Mandates can be powerful symbols in American politics. They accord added legitimacy and credibility to the newly elected president’s proposals. Concerns for representation and political survival encourage members of Congress to support the president if they feel the people have spoken.<sup>5</sup> As a result, mandates change the premises of decision. Perceptions of a mandate in 1980, for example, placed a stigma on big government and exalted the unregulated

marketplace and large defense budgets, providing Ronald Reagan a favorable strategic position for dealing with Congress.

When asked about his mandate in his first press conference following his reelection in 2012, the president displayed no note of triumphalism. Instead, he replied in modest and general terms, “I’ve got a mandate to help middle-class families and families that are working hard to try to get into the middle class. That’s my mandate.” He also noted that the “clear message” from the campaign was to put our partisan differences aside.<sup>6</sup>

The president had it about right. A *Washington Post*-ABC News poll in December 2012 found that only a third of Americans saw him as having won a broad-based mandate in the November election.<sup>7</sup>

The basic ingredients for encouraging perceptions of a mandate were missing. Winning 51 percent is hardly a landslide. Moreover, Obama was the first president since Andrew Jackson in 1832 to be reelected with a smaller percentage of the vote than in his first election. Republicans increased their share of the presidential vote among a number of important demographic groups, including whites and men (four percentage points), younger voters (six points), white Catholics (seven points), and Jews (nine points). He lost the Independent vote by five percentage points (50 percent to 45 percent),<sup>8</sup> which he won 52 percent to 44 percent in 2008.

More broadly, Obama ran a hard-edged negative campaign focused on convincing voters that Mitt Romney was unworthy of becoming president. He gave lip service to an agenda, publishing scaled-back and repackaged ideas from his first term in a 20-page pamphlet and often micro-targeting his policy views to elements of the Democratic coalition rather than addressing the broad electorate.

Perhaps equally important, the Republicans retained their majority in the House. They certainly did not see any mandate, and it was their perceptions that mattered most. “Pretty much everyone in our conference is returning with a bigger margin of victory than the president of the United States,” said House Republican Tim Huelskamp. “He certainly doesn’t have a mandate.”<sup>9</sup> Paul Ryan of Wisconsin agreed that the president won no mandate. “They also reelected the House Republicans,” he noted. Had voters fully embraced the president, and by extension, his call to raise taxes on top earners, “they would have put Nancy Pelosi in charge of the House of Representatives,” Ryan added.<sup>10</sup> (It was convenient for Republicans to ignore the fact that Democrats actually won more votes for House seats than did Republicans.)

There was one policy specific on which the president could reasonably claim a mandate, however: increased taxes on the wealthy. As he noted shortly after the election, he spoke incessantly during the campaign about his insistence on eliminating the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

If there was one thing that everybody understood was a big difference between myself and Mr. Romney, it was when it comes to how we reduce our deficit, I argued for a balanced, responsible approach, and part of that included making sure that the wealthiest Americans pay a little bit more.”

I think every voter out there understood that that was an important debate, and the majority of voters agreed with me.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in a press conference a week before his inauguration, he proclaimed his intent “to carry out the agenda that I campaigned on,” reminding listeners of his campaigning on the question of tax fairness and a “balanced” approach to deficit reduction. “Turns out,” he said

pointedly, “the American people agree with me. They listened to an entire year’s debate over this issue, and they made a clear decision about the approach they prefer.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Support for Government Activism**

Democrats, including the president, wish to move policy in a liberal direction. More Americans viewed themselves as conservative than as liberal, however (Table 1). In 2012, conservatives outnumbered liberals 38 percent to 23 percent. A significantly higher percentage of Americans in most states, even some solidly Democratic ones, called themselves conservative rather than liberal. No state in 2012 had a majority of people who called themselves liberal, and only Massachusetts and Rhode Island (and Washington, DC) had pluralities of liberals.<sup>13</sup> Americans are more than twice as likely to identify themselves as conservative rather than liberal on economic issues, 46 percent to 20 percent. The gap is narrower on social issues, but conservatives still outnumber liberals, 38 percent to 28 percent.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Insert Table 1**

We can also see the dominance of conservatism if we disaggregate opinion by political party (Table 2). While 68 percent of Republicans in 2012 called themselves conservative, only 38 percent of Democrats identified as liberal. Thirty-eight percent of Democrats said they were moderates and another 20 percent saw themselves as conservative. Among Independents, 30 percent said they were conservative, and only 22 percent identified as liberal.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Insert Table 2**

Ideological identification is not determinative, of course, and there is a well-known paradox of the incongruity between ideological identification and issue attitudes.<sup>16</sup> Scholars have long known that only a fraction of the public exhibits the requisite traits of an “ideologue.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, many more Americans are able to choose an ideological label and use it to guide their political judgments than in previous decades.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have found that ideological self-placements are influential determinants of vote choice,<sup>19</sup> issue attitudes,<sup>20</sup> and views toward government spending.<sup>21</sup>

Many liberal policies require public support for, or at least toleration of, government activism in the form of new programs, increased spending, and additional taxes. When asked whether government should do more to solve problems or is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals, 43 percent of voters in 2012 chose the former, but 51 percent chose the less active government option. Forty-nine percent disapproved of Obama’s Affordable Care Act (ACA), while only 44 percent approved.<sup>22</sup>

Showing the difficulty of obtaining support for liberal policy, in April 2013, three years after its passage only 37 percent approved of the ACA.<sup>23</sup> Forty-one percent of Americans did not know ACA was in place, many thinking Congress has repealed it or the Supreme Court had found it unconstitutional.<sup>24</sup> In March, 67 percent of the uninsured younger than age 65 — and 57 percent of the overall population — said they did not understand how the ACA would impact them. Many also continued to hold false impressions of the law: 57 percent incorrectly believed that the ACA included a public option. Nearly half believed the law provides financial assistance for illegal immigrants to buy insurance. And 40 percent—including 35 percent of seniors—still believed that the government would have “death panels” make decisions about end-of-life care for Medicare beneficiaries.<sup>25</sup>

When asked whether it preferred smaller government offering fewer public services or larger government offering more services, the public has chosen the former. Support for larger

government was modest when Obama took office, and decreased slightly during his tenure (Table 3). Similarly, in September 2012, Gallup found that 54 percent of the public felt the government was doing too much while 39 percent thought it should do more to solve the nation's problems.<sup>26</sup>

### **Insert Table 3**

The public's resistance to government activism should not be surprising. In their sweeping "macro" view of public opinion, Robert Erikson, Michael MacKuen, and James Stimson show that opinion always moves contrary to the president's position. They argue that a moderate public always gets too much liberalism from Democrats and too much conservatism from Republicans. Because public officials have policy beliefs as well as an interest in reelection, they are not likely to calibrate their policy stances exactly to match those of the public. Therefore, opinion movement is typically contrary to the ideological persuasion of presidents. Liberal presidents produce movement in the conservative direction and conservatives generate public support for more liberal policies.<sup>27</sup>

The public continuously adjusts its views of current policy in the direction of a long-run equilibrium path as it compares its preferences for ideal policy with its views of current policy to produce a policy mood.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the conservative policy period of the 1950s produced a liberal mood that resulted in the liberal policy changes of the mid-1960s. These policies, in turn, helped elect conservative Richard Nixon. In the late-1970s, Jimmy Carter's liberal policies paved the way for Ronald Reagan's conservative tenure, which in turn laid the foundation for Bill Clinton's more liberal stances. Negative reaction to the conservatism of George W. Bush encouraged the election of the more liberal Barack Obama. Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien have reached similar conclusions with their thermostatic model of public opinion.<sup>29</sup>

### **Public Polarization**

A primary reason for the difficulty of passing major changes in public policy is the challenge of obtaining support from opposition party identifiers among the public. There has been an increase in partisan-ideological polarization as Americans increasingly base their party loyalties on their ideological beliefs rather than on membership in social groups,<sup>30</sup> and they align their policy preferences more closely with their core political predispositions.<sup>31</sup>

Partisans are more likely to apply ideological labels to themselves than in earlier decades, a declining number of them call themselves moderate, and the differences in the ideological self-placements of Republicans and Democrats have grown dramatically since the 1980s. This polarization of partisans has contributed to much more ideological voting behavior.<sup>32</sup>

The policy divide between the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions now encompasses a wide variety of issues including both economic and social issues. Pew found that in 2012 the average difference between the parties on 15 issues was 18 percentage points, the highest in the time series, which began in 1987. The greatest difference, 41 percentage points, was on the social safety net, followed by the environment (39 percentage points), and equal opportunity and the scope and performance of government (33 percentage point each). These issues are at the heart of policymaking in Washington.<sup>33</sup>

Table 4 compares the preferences of Democratic and Republican congressional voters in the 2012 national exit poll on the proper role of government along with four specific policy issues—health care reform, taxes, abortion and same-sex marriage. On each issue, a majority of Democratic voters were on the liberal side while a majority of Republican voters were on the conservative side. The divide between supporters of the two parties was especially stark on the

issue of health care where the question was whether the Affordable Care Act should be preserved or repealed. The great majority of Democratic voters wanted the law to be preserved or expanded while nearly all Republican voters wanted it to be partially or completely repealed.

#### **Insert Table 4**

Partisan polarization extends behind policy disagreements. Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents not only did not support Obama when he initially ran for the presidency. By Election Day 2008, they perceived a huge ideological gulf between themselves and the new president and viewed him as an untrustworthy radical leftist with a socialist agenda. Forty-one percent of McCain voters judged Obama to be an “extreme liberal,” further left than Republican voters had placed any previous Democratic candidate. Moreover, they placed him further to the left of their own ideologies than they had placed any previous Democratic candidate.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the Republicans’ campaign to brand Obama as a radical socialist<sup>35</sup> out of touch with American values resonated with many McCain voters. An African-American candidate was also likely to exacerbate right-wing opposition,<sup>36</sup> as was his Ivy League education and somewhat detached manner. The fact that he spent part of his childhood in Muslim Indonesia and that his middle name was “Hussein” provided additional fodder for those willing or even eager to believe that he was outside the mainstream. Republican voters did not simply oppose Obama; they despised and feared him.

The polarization of the 2008 campaign and the nature of the opposition to Obama laid the groundwork for the intense aversion to Obama and his policies that appeared shortly after he took office. His initial actions of seeking the release of additional TARP funds and promoting an historic economic stimulus bill confirmed for conservatives that he was indeed a left-wing radical who needed to be stopped at all costs and, along with the president’s support of health care reform, fueled the emergence of the Tea Party movement.

Partisan polarization reached record levels during Obama’s first term.<sup>37</sup> Early on in the Obama presidency, the Democratic political organization Democracy Corps concluded from its focus groups that those in the conservative GOP base believed that Obama “is ruthlessly advancing a secret agenda to bankrupt the United States and dramatically expand government control to an extent nothing short of socialism.”<sup>38</sup> In August 2010, a national poll found that 52 percent of the Republican respondents said it was definitely (14 percent) or probably (38 percent) true that “Barack Obama sympathizes with the goals of Islamic fundamentalists who want to impose Islamic law around the world.”<sup>39</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the differences in evaluations of the president between partisans reached record levels in the Obama administration (Table 5).

#### **Insert Table 5**

The 2012 election was even more polarized than the election in 2008. Seventy-seven percent of Republicans characterized Obama as an “extreme liberal.” Only 7 percent of Democrats viewed him that way.<sup>40</sup>

An examination of states that deviated from Obama’s share of the nationwide vote (about 51 percent) by 10 percentage points or more reveals that there were more “polarized” states than in any election in generations. A few states (Figure 1) – Vermont, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, and Hawaii, and the District of Columbia – were polarized in favor of Obama. Most of the polarized states, however, voted for Republican Mitt Romney. The majority of these sixteen states form a belt stretching from West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee through Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas over to the states occupying the center of

the country: Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota. In addition, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, and Alaska were strongly in the Republican camp. Given these results, it is not surprising that there were only 35 House districts where the presidential vote was within five percentage points of the national presidential popular vote margin.<sup>41</sup>

### **Insert Figure 1 here**

Party loyalty in voting hit a record high in 2012. The exit polls found that 92 percent of Democrats voted for Obama and 93 percent of Republicans voted for Romney. (There were similar levels of party loyalty in voting for House and Senate candidates.)<sup>42</sup> There was a 26 percentage-point difference in the underlying partisanship of the districts won by Republicans and Democrats in 2012 (as measured by the presidential vote), the highest ever. States are generally more diverse and thus more politically competitive than House districts, but the gap between the Senate parties' electoral constituencies reached a record level of 15 percentage points.<sup>43</sup>

As Obama began his second term, this polarization persisted in the underlying partisan and ideological divisions of the country. Many Republicans continued to exhibit a strong antipathy toward Obama. Even after nearly four years in office, many Republicans clung to the views that the president was foreign born (and thus ineligible to be president), a Muslim (which they see in negative terms), or both.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, a majority of Republicans support impeaching the president.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the president entered his second term with widest partisan gap in approval of any newly reelected president ever, 80 percentage points (91-11). George W. Bush was the previous record holder with a 76-percentage point difference.<sup>46</sup>

Contributing to the high levels of polarization was the insulation of the opposition. Sixty-three percent of Republicans and Republican leaners reported that they received most of their news from Fox News, which is known for its conservative reporting and commentators.<sup>47</sup> Forty percent of Republicans said they watched Fox regularly.<sup>48</sup> The president's initial actions were grist for commentators on the right, especially those on radio and cable television. They aggressively reinforced the fears of their audiences and encouraged active opposition to the White House.

## **Summary**

In sum, early in the president's second term his strategic position regarding public opinion was not strong. The public remained highly polarized and less than enthusiastic about activist government, and it did not provide Obama with a mandate for governing. Despite criticism from some ill-informed liberal commentators that he was failing to exploit the potential of the bully pulpit,<sup>49</sup> public opinion would continue to present an obstacle to obtaining support from member of Congress not already inclined to support him.

## **Strategic Position Regarding Congress**

Every president needs support in Congress to pass his legislative proposals. It may seem quite reasonable for a president who has just won the biggest prize in American politics by convincing voters and party leaders to support his candidacy to conclude that he should be able to convince members of Congress to support his policies.

As with leading the public, then, presidents may not focus on evaluating existing possibilities when they think they can create their own. Yet, assuming party support in Congress or success in reaching across the aisle to obtain bipartisan support is fraught with dangers. Not a

single systematic study that demonstrates that presidents can reliably move members of Congress, especially members of the opposition party, to support them.

The best evidence is that presidential persuasion is at the margins of congressional decision making. Even presidents who appeared to dominate Congress were actually facilitators rather than directors of change. They understood their own limitations and quite explicitly took advantage of opportunities in their environments. Working at the margins, they successfully guided legislation through Congress. When these resources diminished, they reverted to the more typical stalemate that usually characterizes presidential-congressional relations.<sup>50</sup>

There are several components of the opportunity for obtaining congressional support. First is the presence or absence of the perception of a mandate for change. Do members of Congress think the public has spoken clearly in favor of the president's proposals? We have already seen that Republicans saw no mandate for the president.

### **Divided Government**

The second component is the presence or absence of unified government. Is the president's party in control of the congressional agenda?

The House is the chamber where majority control is most important, because the rules allow the majority to control the agenda and many of the alternatives on which member votes. Republicans control the House in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. Political necessity sometimes forces Republican leaders to allow votes on issues not supported a majority of the party. Since the 2012 election, Speaker John Boehner has allowed three bills to come to the floor which were opposed by most Republicans but passed with a majority of Democratic votes. The issues were a vote on extending the Bush tax cuts but with higher taxes on the wealthiest taxpayers, federal relief funds for victims of Hurricane Sandy in the Northeast, and the Violence against Women Act. The public supported these bills, and party leaders felt blocking them would be worse for the party's reputation than allowing them to go forward.

The president should not expect many other bills to meet this criterion, however. To retain his credibility with his members, many of whom shudder at the idea of finding middle ground with Democrats, he must present a unified front, holding that the House is the last line of defense against the president's progressive agenda.

A Democratic majority in the Senate means there will be fewer hearings harassing the administration and, more importantly, that his proposals will arrive on the floor. However, the majority is not large enough to overcome the persistent threat of filibusters, forcing the president to seek Republican support even in a chamber controlled by his party.

### **Ideology**

An important aspect of the opportunity structure is the ideological division of members of Congress. Are they likely to agree with the president's initiatives? Under divided government, is there potential to reach across the aisle and obtain support from the opposition party?

The ideological gap between the parties in the House reached a record high in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress (2011-2012), and the election did nothing to mitigate the ideological differences between the congressional parties. Keith Poole's prediction for the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress (2013-2014) is that the ideological gap between the House party coalitions will be about the same as in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress.<sup>51</sup>

The Senate did gain some likely moderate Democrats (Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota, Joe Donnelly of Indiana, and Angus King, a Maine independent who organizes with the Democrats, but lost an equal number through retirements (Kent Conrad of North Dakota, Ben



Nelson of Nebraska, and James Webb of Virginia). Republican departures included three of the party's more moderate members (Scott Brown, Olympia Snowe, and Richard Lugar), and all three of its newcomers, Deb Fischer (Nebraska), Ted Cruz (Texas), and Jeff Flake (Arizona) belong to the Tea Party faction. In all, seven of the incoming Senators are likely to be more extreme than the incumbents they replaced, and none of the remaining four is likely to be significantly more moderate than their predecessors. Thus, Keith Poole projects the Senate to be even more ideologically polarized that it was in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress.<sup>52</sup>

The polarization of party elites has been asymmetrical, with most of it the result of the rightward movement of the Republicans.<sup>53</sup> According to Mann and Ornstein, the Republicans have become ideologically extreme, scornful of compromise, contemptuous of facts, evidence, and science, dismissive of the legitimacy of the opposition, and at war with government.<sup>54</sup> It is little wonder that Barack Obama has told aides that a sizable mistake at the start of his administration was his naiveté in thinking he could work with Republicans on weighty issues.<sup>55</sup>

The president was correct. Table 6 shows the average levels of support on contested votes on which the president has taken a stand. In both the House and the Senate, the differences between the support of Democrats and Republicans are the greatest in the past 60 years. The president obtained very little support from Republicans in either chamber, and there is no reason to expect more success in his second term.

**Insert Table 6 here**

## **Republicans and Their Constituencies**

The president requires Republican support to pass his legislative proposals. Are there constituency cross-pressures to cooperate with President Obama to counter their ideological predispositions to oppose him?

One of the most important political trends in the past half century has been the polarization of the congressional parties' respective electoral bases. The partisan realignment of the South<sup>56</sup> and the sorting of conservatives and liberals outside the South into the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively, has increased the level of consistency between party identification and ideology. In the 2012, more than 90 percent of self-identified liberals and conservatives identified with the "appropriate" party. Moreover, the relationship between ideology and voting has become much stronger. In 2012, about 90 percent of self-identified liberals voted for Democrats in the House and Senate elections, while 84 percent of conservatives voted for Republicans.<sup>57</sup> As a consequence, Democratic and Republican elected officials today represent electoral coalitions with strongly diverging policy preferences across a wide range of issues.

The electoral constituencies of the House Republicans contain relatively few Obama supporters. Not a single Republican won in a Democratic-leaning district.<sup>58</sup> Of the 234 Republicans elected to the House in 2012, just 17 represent congressional districts that Obama also won. Among the House Republicans' electoral constituents—those respondents who said they had voted for a winning Republican—only 12 percent reported also voting for Obama. The comparable figure for Senate Republican voters was only 9 percent, the lowest in polling history. (By contrast, the overlap between the electoral constituencies of the president and his partisans in Congress exceeds 90 percent.)<sup>59</sup>

Most members of the House come from districts where they face little threat of losing their seat to the other party. Charlie Cook calculated that there are only 90 swing seats (districts that fall into the range of five percentage points above the national average for a party).<sup>60</sup>

According to Gary Jacobson, only 29 representatives serve districts without a clear partisan tilt.<sup>61</sup> More than 80 percent of those elected to the House in 2012 won with at least 55 percent of the vote. Fifty-seven percent of House Republicans won with 60 percent of the vote or more. Another 28 percent won with between 55 and 60 percent of the vote.<sup>62</sup>

Only one Republican senator (Dean Heller of Nevada) won election in 2012 in a state Obama carried. The 26 states that voted for Obama in 2012 sent 43 Democrats and just 9 Republicans to the Senate. Only four Republican senators serve in the Senate from states that have voted Democrat in each presidential election since 2000: Susan Collins of Maine, Mark Kirk of Illinois, Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania, and Ron Johnson of Wisconsin. Of the 13 states where the 14 Republican Senators will stand for reelection in 2014 (South Carolina has two, Lindsey O. Graham and Tim Scott), Obama won just one in 2012 — Maine. In the remaining dozen states, he lost all but Georgia by double digits. Indeed the average margin of victory for Romney across the 13 states was 20 percentage points.

The decline in shared constituencies between the president and Republican members of Congress reflects an increase in party loyalty and thus a falloff in ticket-splitting among voters. As we have seen, in 2012 party-line voting reached its highest level ever for House and Senate elections, with defection rates below 8 percent for all federal offices. Similarly, 2012 witnessed the lowest incidence of ticket splitting—voting for a Democrat for president and a Republican for U.S. representative or senator, or vice versa—ever, in the range of 7 to 9 percent.<sup>63</sup>

As a result of this individual-level behavior, the proportion of House districts delivering split verdicts—preferring the president of one party, the House candidate of the other—reached a low of only 6 percent in 2012. Split outcomes are more common in Senate elections because states tend to be more politically heterogeneous and more evenly partisan balanced than congressional districts. Nevertheless, in 2012, only 6 states delivered split verdicts. In 2013-2014, only 21 senators represented states lost by their presidential candidate, a modern low.

The electoral coalitions of the two parties are increasingly divided by race as well as by party and ideology. Eighty percent of the House Republicans represent districts in which the white share of the voting-age population exceeds the national average, while 64 percent of House Democrats represent districts in which the minority share of the voting-age population exceeds the national average.<sup>64</sup> Differences in cultural values and attitudes toward government accompany these differences in the racial composition of constituencies, making it more difficult to achieve bipartisan compromises. Few House Republicans have much experience in courting nonwhite voters—or much electoral incentive to do so.

As a consequence of these differences in constituencies, most congressional Republicans are far more afraid of losing a primary to a more conservative challenger than a general election to a Democrat. The right's demonstrated capacity to punish incumbent Republicans in primaries discourages straying from party orthodoxy. For them, a deal is often more dangerous than no deal.

The potential for such challenges is real, as the Republican primary electorate is very conservative. Republicans in the public are much less likely than Democrats or Independents to want to make compromises to deal with policy issues.<sup>65</sup> We experienced a taste of this inflexibility during a Republican presidential primary debate in Ames Iowa on August 11, 2011, when every candidate rejected the notion of a budget deal that would include tax increases even if accompanied by spending cuts 10 times as large.

In perhaps the most extreme expression of conservative rigidity, the Utah Republican Party denied longtime conservative Senator Robert Bennett its nomination for reelection in 2010.

Republican Governor Charlie Crist had to leave his party and run for the Senate as an Independent in Florida because he was unlikely to win the Republican nomination against conservative Marco Rubio. Senator Lisa Murkowski lost her renomination in Alaska to a largely unknown candidate on the far right of the political spectrum. The previous year, Republican Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania switched parties, believing there was little chance he could win a Republican primary against conservative Pat Toomey. In 2012, Senator Richard Lugar lost the Republican primary in Indiana to a candidate supported by the Tea Party.

Equally important as a curb on compromise is that fact that when elected officials interact with the more politically engaged voters within their reelection constituencies—the voters who are the most attentive to what they are doing, the most likely to influence their friends and neighbors, the most likely to donate money to their campaigns and the most likely to vote in primary elections—the divide between their supporters and their opponents is even greater than it is among rank-and-file voters. Active supporters of Republican elected officials are generally very conservative.<sup>66</sup>

Compounding the pressure to stay to the right are conservative radio and television commentators that relentlessly incite the Republican base against the president.

Party differences in electoral bases are strongly related to party differences in presidential support and roll call voting.<sup>67</sup> Congressional Republicans are responding rationally to their incentives for reelection when they oppose the president. Thus, the number of Republicans in the 113th Congress who see cutting a deal with the president as politically advantageous is close to zero.

### **Impact of Republican Antipathy**

Republican antipathy for Obama was so great that he had to avoid proposing his own immigration bill, because do so made it more difficult for Republican members of Congress to support it. Because Republicans in Congress come from solidly Republican states or districts, it is easier for them to support an immigration bill that has broad-based support in the business and farming communities (and that also happens to be supported by Obama and the Democratic leadership) than to back a bill so popularly identified with the other side.

After outlining what he wanted in an immigration bill, the president adopted a hands-off approach to designing the legislation, deferring to negotiations among a bipartisan group of senators known as the Gang of Eight. He adopted this strategy soon after his inauguration, as he was preparing to introduce his own bill during a January 29, visit to Las Vegas. Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York, a Gang of Eight member, told the White House the group was close to reaching consensus on a bill and asked Obama to hold off on announcing his own in order to avoid disrupting the talks. Obama agreed.<sup>68</sup>

Senate Democrats feared that an Obama bill would scare off Republicans like Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who has presidential ambitions. Indeed, Rubio's office once issued a statement to deny that he was discussing immigration policy "with anyone in the White House," even as it criticized the president for not consulting Republicans. Indeed, Republican antipathy puts the president in a Catch 22 bind. If he stays aloof from legislative action, Republicans and others accuse him of a lack of leadership. If he gets involved, they complain that they cannot support any bill so closely identified with him without risking the contempt of conservative voters.<sup>69</sup>

Given the broad influences of ideology and constituency, it is not surprising that Frances Lee has shown that presidential leadership itself demarcates and deepens cleavages in Congress. The differences between the parties and the cohesion within them on floor votes are typically

greater when the president takes a stand on issues. When the president adopts a position, members of his party have a stake in his success, while opposition party members have a stake in the president losing. Moreover, both parties take cues from the president that help define their policy views, especially when the lines of party cleavage are not clearly at stake or already well established. In early 2010 Republican senators, including the minority leader, Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, demanded that Obama endorse bipartisan legislation to create a deficit-reduction commission. When he did so, they voted against the bill, killing it. When the president supported a deficit reduction plan from the Gang of Six in 2011, Republicans turned to oppose it.<sup>70</sup> This dynamic of presidential leadership further complicates Obama's efforts to win Republican support.

### **Democrats and Their Constituencies**

The picture on the Democratic side is more mixed. The party in the House is more ideologically coherent. However, this coherence occurred through the resignations, retirements, and primary and general election defeats of 13 members of the moderate Blue Dog coalition, lowering its membership to 14. As recently as 2010, there had been 54 members.<sup>71</sup>

House Democrats are also from secure seats. Ninety-six percent of House Democrats held seats in districts Obama won in 2012; only 9 represented districts won by Romney. Only 10 Democrats won Republican-leaning districts in 2012.<sup>72</sup>

Ten Democratic senators represent states Republican presidential candidates have won in each election since 2000. Seven of the 21 Senate Democrats who will stand for reelection in 2014 represent states that Romney won, by double digits in six of them. Thus, there is a notable group of Senate Democrats who have an incentive to display some independence from the president.

Equally important, by trying to negotiate with Republicans, the president would face resistance from identifiers with his own party. Cuts to education and other major domestic policies including big ticket-items such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid benefits and eligibility for the middle class were not popular with the public<sup>73</sup> or Democratic leaders in Congress. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi warned against raising the eligibility age for Medicare from 65 to 67 as a way to shrink federal spending. "We are not throwing America's seniors over the cliff to give a tax cut to the wealthiest people in America. We have clarity on that," she declared.<sup>74</sup> In response to the president's proposal to make cuts in the growth of Medicare expenditures and change the cost of living measure for Social Security increases, 107 House Democrats — more than half the caucus — signed a letter declaring their "vigorous opposition to cutting Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid benefits."<sup>75</sup> A number of Democratic senators, especially those from Republican-leaning states, actively opposed the president's proposals regarding entitlement spending.<sup>76</sup>

### **The Structure of Congressional Choice**

The structure of the choices facing Congress can also help or hinder the president. Which side benefits from a failure to act? Are there broad political incentives to act on an issue?

There can be little doubt that a unique aspect of the "fiscal cliff" issue was of invaluable aid to the president. The default position, the broad tax increases that would occur if no new policy was enacted, was unacceptable and highly salient to Republicans. Thus, they had incentives to negotiate and pass a bill to avoid being blamed for tax increases and undermining their long held economic beliefs.

Sequestration was a different story. Once again, policy changes would occur if Congress failed to act. In this case, automatic budget cuts would go into effect for both defense and domestic discretionary (not entitlement) programs unless the Congress and the president could agree on a budget bill. The White House thought the cuts to defense would gain it leverage to obtain Republican support for more revenues and thus prevent the sequestration. The Republicans called the president's bluff, and the budget cuts occurred. The default position was more acceptable to Republican deficit hawks than seeking revenue to pay for discretionary programs. Moreover, the White House could not fully employ its leverage. The president would not risk a government shutdown by demanding a sequester fix out of fear the public would blame Democrats for the shutdown.<sup>77</sup>

Of course, most policies, such as gun control, do not take effect without positive action. Usually, Republicans lack incentives to act. The one exception may be immigration reform. With Mitt Romney winning an anemic 27 percent of the Latino vote in 2012, and the demographic trends of whites composing a declining percentage of the electorate and Hispanics composing an increasing percentage, many party leaders feel it is time to appeal to Latinos with action on immigration reform.

Calculating political advantage on budgetary issues is difficult. Making progress toward their goal of limiting the size of government provides Republicans an incentive to strike a bargain with the president. Moreover, such a deal would also provide a measure of political cover because both parties would share responsibility for the pain of cuts to entitlements. On the other hand, resisting the tax increases that would be part of a bargain with the White House would shield Republican incumbents from primary challenges, and deferring unpopular cuts on entitlements could help Republicans win back the Senate in 2014 and the White House in 2016. In theory, the most effective budgetary leverage the Republicans have is a refusal to raise the debt limit. Obama has promised not to negotiate on the debt limit, however, viewing Republicans as having more to lose politically if the public holds them responsible for plunging the country into an economic crisis.

## **Summary**

On the evening of Obama's first inauguration, senior Republicans met to plot their opposition to the new president.<sup>78</sup> Little has changed. As he began his second term, the president faced a Republican majority in the House and a substantial Republican block in the Senate with little or no inclination to support his initiatives. With the exception of a few issues that served their interests independent of the White House's efforts, the ideology and constituencies of Republicans encouraged vigorous opposition. Moreover, cutting a deal with Republicans would complicate his efforts to keep the Democrats in the fold. Thus, it is no surprise that he lost on gun control and sequestration within the first 100 days of his second term.

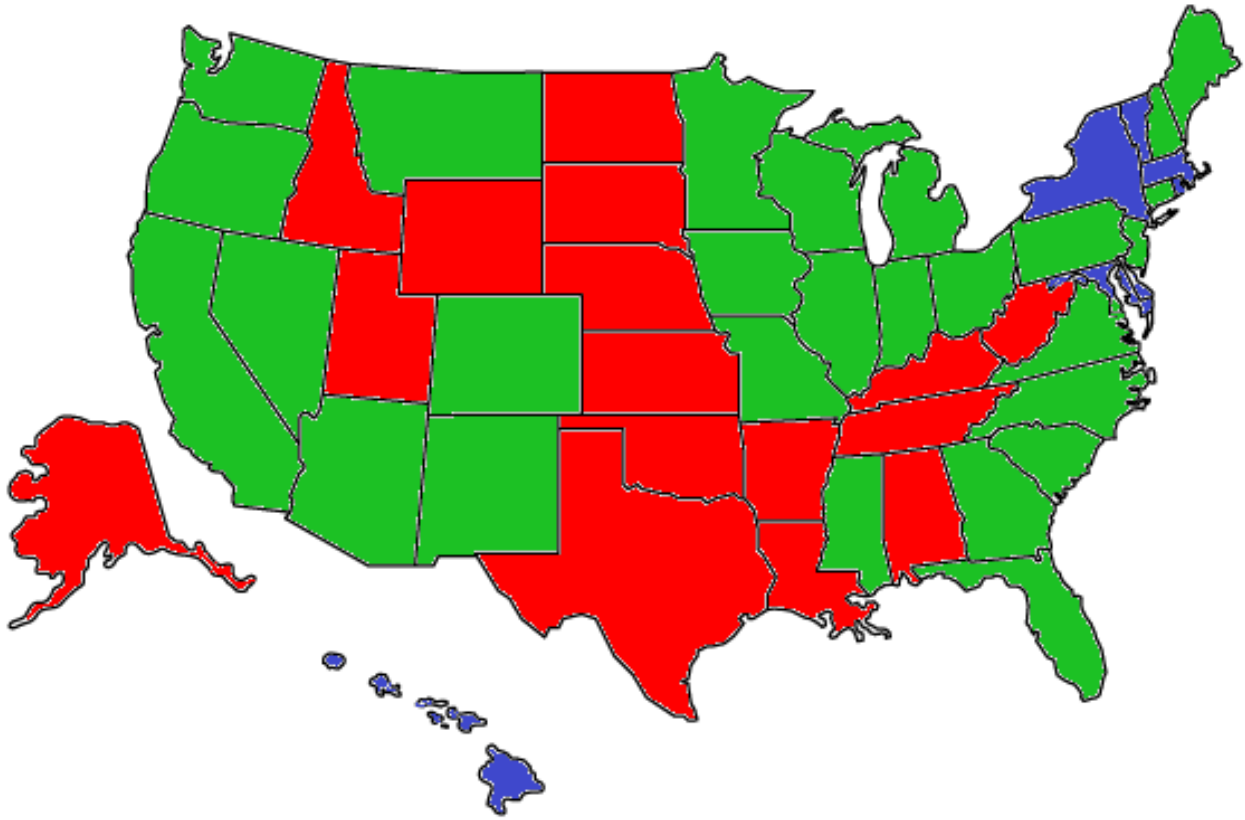
## **Conclusion**

Presidents cannot create opportunities for change. Instead, effective presidents recognize and exploit opportunities that exist in their environments. When these opportunities are few, major change is unlikely to occur. Those who see a pressing need for change are frustrated with the inability of Washington to resolve long-standing issues. Sometimes they take their frustrations out on the president, declaring that he should more effectively move the public and Congress to support his initiatives.

There is little prospect for success in these endeavors, however. The opportunity structure in contemporary U.S. politics is not conducive to liberal change, and there is little the president can do about it. In theory, the electorate could punish extremism and intransigence and reward moderation and compromise at the polls. However, the polarization we see in Washington has its roots in local elections and constituency politics. The public does not seem inclined to support moderation. Those moderates who are elected frequently lose their seats when national tides run against their party. Most of the centrist Democrats elected to the House in 2006 and 2008—virtually all of them from balanced or Republican-leaning districts—are now gone. Similarly, moderate Republican senators are a dying breed.

Thus, the U.S. has parliamentary-style political parties operating in a system of shared powers, a guarantee for gridlock. Until the political environment changes, policymaking in the U.S. will continue to be anti-deliberative, slow, and reactive, accepting the short-term fix rather than durable long-term solutions.

**Figure 1**  
**Polarized States in 2012 Presidential Election**



Red =  $\leq 10$  percentage points below Obama's national average  
Blue =  $\geq 10$  percentage points above Obama's national average

**Table 1**  
**Self-Reported Ideology of the Public**

<u>Year</u>	<u>% Conservative</u>	<u>% Moderate</u>	<u>% Liberal</u>
1992	36	43	17
1993	39	40	18
1994	38	42	17
1995	36	39	16
1996	38	40	16
1997	37	40	19
1998	37	40	19
1999	38	40	19
2000	38	40	19
2001	38	40	20
2002	38	39	19
2003	38	40	20
2004	38	40	19
2005	38	39	20
2006	37	38	21
2007	37	37	22
2008	39	37	22
2009	39	38	21
2010	40	36	20
2011	40	36	21
2012	38	36	23

*Source:* Gallup Poll.

*Question:* “How would you describe your political views—very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal”?



**Table 2**  
**Ideological Self-Identification of Party Groups**

<b><u>Party ID</u></b>	<b><u>% Conservative</u></b>	<b><u>% Moderate</u></b>	<b><u>% Liberal</u></b>
Republicans	68	26	5
Independents	30	43	22
Democrats	20	38	38

*Source:* Pew Research Center, *2012 Values Survey*, April 4-15, 2012.

*Question:* “Do you think of yourself as \_\_\_\_\_ “?”

**Table 3**  
**Public Support for Larger Government**

<b><u>Poll Dates</u></b>	<b><u>% Smaller Government, Fewer Services</u></b>	<b><u>% Larger Government, More Services</u></b>	<b><u>% No Opinion</u></b>
June 12-15, 2008	50	45	5
January 13-16, 2009	53	43	4
June 18-21, 2009	54	41	4
January 12-15, 2010	58	38	4
April 22-25, 2010	56	40	4
August 29-September 1, 2011	56	38	6
August 22-25, 2012	54	41	5

*Source: ABC News-Washington Post Poll.*

*Question: “Generally speaking, would you say you favor (smaller government with fewer services), or (larger government with more services)?*

**Table 4**  
**The Policy Divide in Public Opinion, 2012**

<u>Issue</u>	<b>Percent Favor</b>	
	<u>Democratic Voters</u>	<u>Republican Voters</u>
Activist Government	74	17
Keeping Health Care Law	81	14
Raising Income Taxes	83	44
Same-Sex Marriage	73	29
Legal Abortion	82	43

*Source:* Alan I. Abramowitz, “The Electoral Roots of America’s Dysfunctional Government,” paper delivered at the Conference on Governing in Polarized Politics, Rothermere American Institute, University of Oxford, April 16-17, 2013, p. 38. Based on 2012 National Exit Poll.

**Table 5**  
**Party Differences in Presidential Public Approval**

<b>Year of Obama's Tenure</b>	<b>Party Difference*</b>	<b>Next Largest Gap</b>	
		<b>Percentage Points</b>	<b>President</b>
1st, 2009-2010	65	52	Clinton, 1992-1993
2nd, 2010-2011	68	56	Reagan, 1982-1983
3rd, 2011-2012	68	59	G. W. Bush, 2003-2004
4th, 2012-2013	76	76	G. W. Bush, 2004-2005

\* Differences expressed as percentage points

*Source:* Gallup Poll

*Question:* "Do you approve or disapprove of the job \_\_\_\_ is doing as president"?

**Table 6**  
**Presidential Support in Congress, 1953–2012**

<b>President</b>	<b>President's Party</b>	<b>House of Representatives % Support*</b>			<b>Senate % Support</b>		
		<b>President's Party</b>	<b>Opposition Party</b>	<b>Difference<sup>†</sup> in Support</b>	<b>President's Party</b>	<b>Opposition Party</b>	<b>Difference<sup>†</sup> in Support</b>
Eisenhower	Republican	63	42	21	69	36	33
Kennedy	Democrat	73	26	47	65	33	32
Johnson	Democrat	71	27	44	56	44	12
Nixon/Ford	Republican	64	39	25	63	33	30
Carter	Democrat	63	31	32	63	37	36
Reagan	Republican	70	29	51	74	31	43
G. H. W. Bush	Republican	73	27	44	75	29	46
Clinton	Democrat	75	24	51	83	22	61
G. W. Bush	Republican	84	20	64	86	18	68
Obama (2009-2012)	Democrat	85	18	67	94	21	73

\* On roll-call votes on which the winning side was supported by fewer than 80 percent of those voting.

† Differences expressed as percentage points.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, George C. Edwards III, *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); George C. Edwards III, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*; *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); *The Strategic President*, chaps 2-3; and *Governing by Campaigning: The Politics of the Bush Presidency*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See Edwards, *The Strategic President*, chaps. 2-3, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress*, chap. 8; Lawrence J. Grossback, David A. M. Peterson, and James A. Stimson, *Mandate Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in a News Conference,” White House, November 14, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Washington Post*-ABC News poll, December 13-16, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> 2012 National Exit Poll.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Ben Terris, “A Presidential Mandate? How About 435 Congressional Ones?,” *National Journal*, November 16, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Kaplan, “Ryan: No Mandate for Obama in Election,” *National Journal*, November 14, 2012. See also Alexis Simendinger and Caitlin Huey-Burns, “Amid ‘Frank’ Talks, Obama Uses Polls as Pry Bar,” *RealClearPolitics*, December 14, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President in a News Conference.”

<sup>12</sup> White House, “Transcript of News Conference by the President,” January 14, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Gallup Poll, “Alabama, North Dakota, Wyoming Most Conservative States,” February 1, 2013. The analysis is based on telephone interviews conducted as part of Gallup Daily tracking Jan. 1-Dec. 31, 2012. The sample includes 211,972 U.S. adults. The margin of sampling error for most states is  $\pm 3$  percentage points, but is as high as  $\pm 6$  percentage points for the District of Columbia.

<sup>14</sup> Gallup Poll’s annual Values and Beliefs Poll, May 3-6, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Gallup Poll surveys conducted January-September 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson, *Ideology in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Shawn Treier and D. Sunshine Hillygus, “The Nature of Political Ideology in the Contemporary Electorate,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73 (Winter 2009): 679-703; Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson, “Symbolic Ideology in the American Electorate,” *Electoral Studies* 28 (September 2009): 388-402; William G. Jacoby, “Policy Attitudes, Ideology, and Voting Behavior in the 2008 Election,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2009; James A. Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Pamela J. Conover and Stanley Feldman, “The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Identifications,” *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (October 1981): 617-645; David O.

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<sup>22</sup> 2012 National Exit Polls.

<sup>23</sup> Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, March 5-10, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Kaiser Health Tracking Poll Omnibus Supplement, April 18-21, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, March 5-10, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Gallup poll, September 6-9, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chap. 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 344, 374.

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<sup>29</sup> Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien, *Degrees of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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<sup>38</sup> Charlie Cook, "Intensity Matters," *National Journal*, October 24, 2009.

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<sup>41</sup> Nate Silver, “As Swing Districts Dwindle, Can a Divided House Stand?,” *New York Times*, December 27, 2012. Only 14 of these are Republican seats.

<sup>42</sup> 2012 National Exit Poll and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Both the 2012 National Exit Poll and the CCES found that 93 percent of partisans reported voting for their party’s House candidates and 92 percent for their party’s Senate candidate. In the CCES, 95 percent of the respondents voted for their party’s presidential nominee. Jacobson, “Partisan Polarization in American Politics,” p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobson, “Partisan Polarization in American Politics,” pp. 10-11.

<sup>44</sup> See Brendan Nyhan, “New Surveys Show the Persistence of Misperceptions,” *HUFFPOST POLLSTER*, July 30, 2012; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International, June 28 - July 9, 2012. Nearly a third of Republicans said Obama was a Muslim.

<sup>45</sup> HuffPost/YouGov poll, January 30-February 2, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> For previous presidents, see Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*, p. 151. The poll for Obama is from the Gallup tracking Poll, January 21-27, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Pew Research Media Attitudes Survey, July 22-26, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Pew Research Center, News Consumption Survey, June 8-28, 2010.

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<sup>57</sup> 2012 National Exit Poll; CCES. Jacobson, “Partisan Polarization in American Politics,” p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, “The Congressional Elections of 2012,” paper prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 11-14, 2013, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pearson, 2013), 271-272.

<sup>60</sup> Charlie Cook, “The Big Sort,” *National Journal*, April 13, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Jacobson, “Partisan Polarization in American Politics,” p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Calculations by Martin Wattenberg, University of California, Irvine.

<sup>63</sup> Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 173.

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Brownstein and Scott Bland, “Stairway to Nowhere,” *National Journal*, January 12, 2013.

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<sup>71</sup> David Wasserman, “House Overview: How House Democrats Beat the Point Spread,” *Cook Political Report*, November 9, 2012.

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<sup>73</sup> ABC News/*Washington Post* polls, December 13-16, 2012, and April 11-14, 2013; CBS News poll, December 12-16, 2012; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press poll, December 5-9, 2012; McClatchy-Marist poll, December 4-6, 2012; AP-GfK poll, November 29-December 3, 2012; United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. November 29-December 2, 2012.

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