How Polarization Ends*

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Abstract

The U.S. is experiencing a period of intense partisan polarization, but this is not the first time its two main parties have stood far apart on policy issues. In the periods 1790-1820 and 1860-1930, polarization rose to levels comparable to the present before declining to lower levels. We explore what these episodes of depolarization can teach us about how polarization ends (when it does), and we develop a model of polarization dynamics to guide our analysis of these historical cases. We find three broad patterns. First, as polarization ends one of the parties becomes electorally dominant—a trend driven in part by changes in the composition of the voting population, which in turn is influenced by demographic and structural economic changes. Second, the issues that initially divided the parties decrease in importance and are replaced by new issues. Third, the dominant party fractures on the new issues, eventually giving rise to a new party system that replaces the existing one as new political cleavages emerge.

Key words: polarization, party systems

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1 Introduction

America is experiencing a period of intense partisan polarization, with the two major parties standing further apart on policy issues today than at any other time in the last hundred years (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006, McCarty, 2019). But this is not the first time in American history that politics have been polarized. Two other periods of profound polarization were the period 1790–1824, roughly corresponding to the First Party System, and the period 1860–1930, roughly corresponding to the Third and Fourth Party Systems. These periods, both of which ended with new party systems replacing the old ones, provide us the opportunity to closely examine the processes by which polarization ends. When we look at these instances of polarization ending, what do they teach us to expect about how our current period of polarization might end?

We claim that the following three features are common to the two historical cases of depolarization:

1. Polarization ended as one of the parties became electorally dominant.

2. The main issues on which the parties were previously polarized declined in political importance as new issues emerged.

3. The dominant party fractured on the new issues.

In the case of the First Party System, the two major parties (the Democratic-Republicans and Federalists) polarized on issues such as the power of the federal government, the role of elites in politics, and foreign policy. They competed on relatively equal terms against each other until 1802, after which the Democratic-Republicans began a period of electoral dominance. In the six elections that took place between 1790 and 1802, each party won control of the House three times. After 1802, the Federalists started to decline, competing in their last presidential election in 1816. Polarization between the two parties ended during the Era of Good Feelings (1815-1825) and the Democratic-Republicans achieved electoral dominance with the number of congressional seats held by the Federalists shrinking steadily until the party finally disappeared from Congress in 1824.

The issues on which the parties were previously polarized gradually lost salience. Divisions over foreign policy, for example, became less pronounced following the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the peaceful resolution to the War of 1812, and extensions of the franchise diminished the political power of elites. New issues emerged, such as the tariff, slavery, and public investment in infrastructure such as roads and canals useful to the fast-growing West. Shortly after they attained a political monopoly, the Democratic-Republicans started to factionalize on these new issues and eventually split into two parties—the Democratic Party and the National Republican Party that respectively supported and opposed Andrew Jackson, who emerged as a newly polarizing figure in American politics. Eventually, the

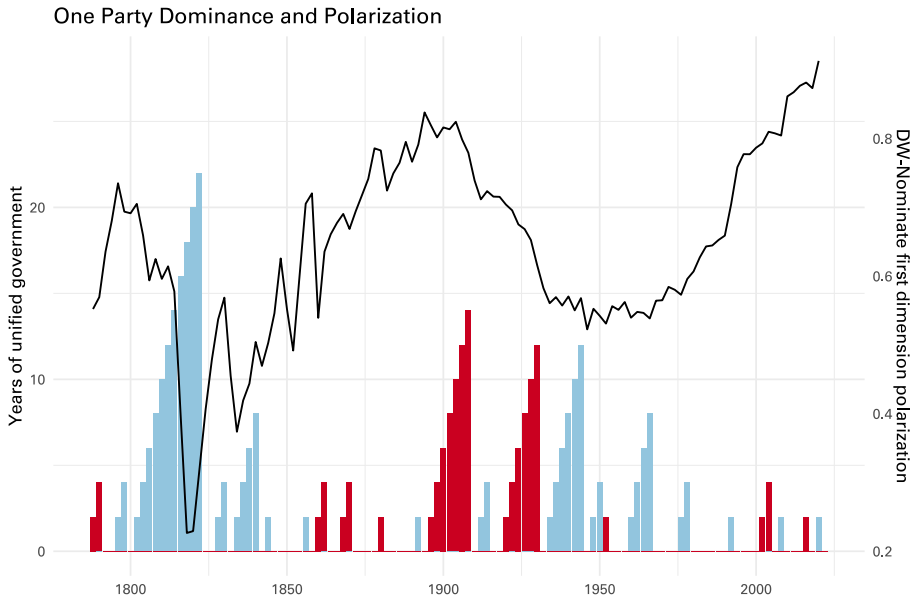

Figure 1: The black line shows the DW-Nominate based polarization measure using first dimension means in the House from Lewis et al. (2021). The bars show the stretch of cumulative preceding years of unified government control (House, Senate, and presidency) for Democrats (or the Democratic-Republican Party pre-1834) in blue and for Federalists, Whigs, or Republicans in red. For example, a value of 10 means that the party has enjoyed uninterrupted unified control of the House, Senate, and White House for a stretch of 10 preceding years. George Washington is coded as a Federalist while John Quincy Adams is coded as a Whig, even though the former is occasionally considered independent while the latter was a Whig who ran on the Democratic-Republican ticket. These choices do not affect the main takeaways.

Whig party was borne out of these divisions, bringing together a coalition of ex-Federalists and anti-Jackson Republicans.

In the case of the Third and Fourth Party Systems, the Democrats and Republicans were bitterly divided over Reconstruction and the legacy of the Civil War, the protective tariff, and currency policy. The two parties were electorally competitive prior to 1896 with the Democrats winning control of the House in eight elections since the end of the Civil War, the Republicans in seven, and control of the House changing parties six times in fifteen elections. After 1896, the Republican party started to become dominant. Republicans controlled both the House and Senate for eighteen of the next twenty-four years and the presidency for sixteen. Between 1920 and 1928, they dominated even more thoroughly, winning control of both houses of Congress and the presidency in all elections during this period.

At the same time, the issues on which the parties were polarized declined in political importance, and new issues emerged around anti-trust regulation, banking policy, and redistribution, driven by rising inequality and industrialization. These new issues split the

Republicans into their progressive and stalwart factions, and became the center of political competition at the end of this period, creating new political cleavages that hardened as Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal gave rise to a wholly new party system.

Our claim that polarization ends with one of the parties becoming dominant is supported by data depicted in Figure 1. Using measures of congressional polarization from Lewis et al. (2021), the figure shows three distinct peaks in polarization—the first corresponding to the First Party System, the second to the Third and Fourth Party Systems and the third to our current period. It shows how the decline of polarization is tracked by the growing dominance of one party, measured in the bar series. These bars indicate the number of uninterrupted preceding years in which a party held unified control of both houses of Congress and the presidency. Longer spells of uninterrupted control indicate the political dominance of one of the two main political parties in a given period.[1]

The figure shows how the first period of polarization ended with a clear rise in the dominance of the Democratic-Republican party, which held unified control of government for more than two decades. The second period of polarization ended with the emergence of Republican party dominance in the years after 1890 and again in the 1920s, interrupted only briefly during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. Apart from these two periods of one-party dominance and the abrupt shift to Democratic party dominance during the FDR years, neither of the two major parties in U.S. politics held unified control of government for more than eight consecutive years at any other time in the series.

We have so far only made a descriptive claim associating the end of polarization with the emergence of one-party dominance, and not the claim that party dominance causes the end of polarization independent of factors that drive both. This raises an obvious question: If polarization ends with the rise of party dominance, what are the underlying forces that make a party dominant that might also contribute to depolarization?

In the two instances of polarization that we examine, demographic and structural economic changes that affected the composition of the voting population appear to be important factors contributing to the emergence of party dominance. In the case of the First Party System, the settlement of areas away from the Atlantic seaboard added new voters who were politically disposed to support the Republicans while extensions of the franchise and immigration diminished the Federalists' power even in their New England strongholds. In the case of the Third and Fourth party systems, rapid urbanization fueled by trends such as immigration and the transition of the American economy away from agriculture towards manufacturing diminished the size of the Democrats' core supporters (rural voters, especially in the South) while growing the size of the Republicans' core supporters (urban workers and business owners in the North). In both cases the declining parties attempted

[1]The overall pattern in Figure 1 is robust to taking a nonparametric approach that measures partisan polarization using party unity measures, as those reported by Congressional Quarterly, Clinton, Katznelson and Lapinski (2014), and others; see Appendix Figure D.1. This measure also supports the claim that partisanship peaked and declined in the periods that we focus on.

to stop or slow the underlying trends that drove these demographic shifts, but they were ultimately unsuccessful.

To shed light on how these trends could affect polarization and party competition, we develop a model of depolarization in which changes in the composition of the voting population affect the voting patterns of the parties' elected members in Congress and their competitiveness in elections. Legislators want to avoid being out of step with both their electorate and the majority position of their party. When the voting population is close to evenly divided on the issues, parties take opposing positions on these issues while remaining electorally competitive. In this situation, polarization is at its highest.[2] But as voters tilt more towards the position of one of the parties, that party grows in strength and remains cohesive while the declining party's elected members start to break away by supporting the more popular policy positions of the other party. Polarization then starts to decline.

As the dominant party's policy positions gets even more popular, there reaches a point at which the the declining party's elected members are voting so much with the opposing party that the declining party risks adopting the platform of the rising party on the main issues that divided them. This undermines the current party system as the political cleavages that originally separated the two parties lose political relevance. A new party system then takes shape with the parties being divided on newly emergent issues that also divide the population. When this happens, the party that was dominant starts to become less cohesive as members of its large diverse coalition factionalize around the new cleavages.

Our model rules out party systems in which the two parties are indistinguishable from each other on policy, as they are in the median voter theorem. While in principle polarization could end with parties adopting similar platforms and remaining electorally competitive, that scenario is not consistent with the historical record. In fact, it is possible to argue an even stronger claim—that the mid-20th century period of American politics during which Downs (1957) wrote (roughly 1950-1980, corresponding to the second half of the Fifth Party System) and inspired decades of research on policy convergence between the parties is atypical in American history. All other periods of American politics besides that one are either periods of high polarization or of party dominance, rather than of low polarization and electoral parity between the parties—a claim that is evident from Figure 1.

We are not the first to draw a connection between electoral competition and partisanship. In prior work, Lee (2016) argues that when elections are competitive, both parties have incentives to obstruct rather than compromise. Examining polarization during the Gilded Age, Mayhew (1974) notes that no party could maintain long-term dominance, leading to sharp partisan divisions and limited bipartisanship. Similarly, Jacobson and Carson (2019)

[2]In this sense, polarization is a starting feature of our model. We are agnostic as to how the original issues emerged that caused the parties to be polarized in the first place. This question has received considerable attention from prior work summarized thoroughly in the case of contemporary polarization in McCarty (2019). By asking how polarization ends rather than what causes it, we operate under the premise that the processes that end polarization could be distinct from those implied by simply reversing its causes.

argue that intense competition for control of Congress, fueled by close elections, drives partisan behavior in both campaigning and legislative action; see also Brunell (2010), and Aldrich and Rohde (1998). These authors link the closeness of elections and the uncertainty of maintaining a legislative majority to polarized behavior, though none of them links the end of polarization to the emergence of one-party dominance.[3]

Our work also relates to the broader study of American party systems, notably the works of Sundquist (1983), Burnham (1970) and Key (1955) on how political realignments occur in response to new issues that reconfigure party coalitions.[4] Others that examine party systems, issue emergence and changing cleavage structures outside of American politics include Kitschelt (1994), Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and Sartori (1976). Addressing the mechanisms by which new issues emerge, Riker (1988) develops a theory of "heresthetics" to explain how elites structure choices to their advantage, including in periods of transition between party systems. Similarly, Schattschneider (1975) discusses how parties strategically raise new issues to divide the opposition and strengthen their own coalitions. On the other hand, Carmines and Stimson (1981) and Abramowitz (2010) explain how issue evolution is linked to population and demographic changes. Our claim that depolarization and the creation of new party systems are driven in part by demographic and structural economic changes builds on their work, as well as McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (2006), Sides and Vavreck (2014), and many others on the importance of economic and structural fundamentals in driving partisan behavior.

In the next section, we outline a simple model that helps orient our analysis of the two cases of depolarization that motivate us. We examine these cases more closely in the two sections that follow. We then conclude with some lessons from these analyses.

2 Model

2.1 Party Systems

There are two parties A and B and a set of issue bundles $\mathcal{I}$ only one of which, $i \in \mathcal{I}$, is politically active. A position on issue any issue $i \in \mathcal{I}$ is a choice from $\{0, 1\}$.

Parties compete by fielding candidates in each of a continuum of districts.[5] In each district, voters are a continuum divided into two groups with respect to the active issue: a share $1 - \lambda_i > 0$ have ideal position 0 on issue i while $\lambda_i > 0$ have ideal position 1.

Candidates run on the share of roll call votes they are expected to cast in favor of each of the policy positions on the active issue bundle, if elected. We use α_i^d to denote the share

[3]On this point Mayhew (2011) comes closest, arguing that competitive party systems provide incentives for parties to self-correct and moderate over time, but does not articulate a mechanism for this.

[4]Se also Chambers, Burnham and Sorauf (1975) and Schickler (2016), and for a critique of the realignments literature, see Mayhew (2008).

[5]This assumption makes each district's influence in the legislature negligible and follows prior work such as Callander (2005), Polborn and Snyder (2016), and Bernhardt, Buisseret and Hidir (2020).

of votes party A's candidate in district d is expected to cast in favor of position 1 on the active issue i. The remaining $1-\alpha_i^d$ share of votes will be cast for position 0. Similarly, β_i^d will denote the share of votes that party B's candidate in district d can be expected to cast for position 1 on issue i while the remaining $1-\beta_i^d$ will be cast for position 0.

A voter's policy utility is the share of votes that the elected representative from their district casts in favor of that voter's ideal position. The expected policy utility $u_{i,j}^{v,d}$ to a voter v in district d with ideal position $z_i^{v,d} \in \{0,1\}$ on the salient issue i from voting for party j is therefore

$$u_{i,A}^{v,d} = (1-\alpha_i^d)(1-z_i^{v,d}) + \alpha_i^d z_i^{v,d}$$
$$u_{i,B}^{v,d} = (1-\beta_i^d)(1-z_i^{v,d}) + \beta_i^d z_i^{v,d}$$

Voting behavior is also subject to individual and district-level random voting shocks ϵ and ϵ^d that are additive in favor of party B, so that the voter votes for party A if and only if

$$u_{i,A}^{v,d} \geq u_{i,B}^{v,d} + \epsilon + \epsilon^d.$$

We assume that ϵ is drawn iid across voters and uniformly from $[-\frac{1}{2\psi}, +\frac{1}{2\psi}]$ while ϵ^d is drawn iid across districts and uniformly from $[-\frac{\psi}{2\varphi}, +\frac{\psi}{2\varphi}]$, with $\psi < \frac{1}{2}$ and $\varphi < \frac{1}{2}\psi$. This will guarantee that our expressions for vote shares and probabilities of winning are differentiable and a local analysis of equilibrium is sufficient. The parameters φ and ψ are common across districts so we don't index them by d.

A standard derivation shows that if i is the politically salient issue bundle then the probability that A's candidate will win in district d is

$$\Phi_A^d(i, \alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d) = \frac{1}{2} + \varphi[(1-\lambda_i)(\beta_i^d - \alpha_i^d) + \lambda_i(\alpha_i^d - \beta_i^d)]$$

while the probability that B's candidate will win is

$$\Phi_B^d(i, \alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d) = 1 - \Phi_A^d(i, \alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d).$$

The share of districts won by party j is

$$\Phi_j(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d) = \int \Phi_j^d(i, \alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d) \mathrm{d}d.$$

When deciding the share of votes that a candidate will cast in favor of one of the two positions, the candidate faces two considerations: how out of step she is with other representatives from her party, and what is electorally responsible, i.e. how out of step she is

with voters.[6] To formalize this, let

$$\alpha_i = \int \frac{\alpha_i^d \Phi_A^d(i, \alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d)}{\Phi_A(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d)} \mathrm{d}d \quad \text{and} \quad \beta_i = \int \frac{\beta_i^d \Phi_B^d(i, \alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d)}{\Phi_B(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d)} \mathrm{d}d$$

be the expected share of votes cast for position 1 on i from the winning members of parties A and B. Since there is a continuum of districts, these are also the realized shares of votes cast, and α_i and β_i are both unaffected by any changes in α_i^d or β_i^d in any one district d. Define the *party's ideal position* on issue i to be

$$\hat{\alpha}_i = \mathbf{1}\{\alpha_i \geq \frac{1}{2}\} \quad \text{and} \quad \hat{\beta}_i = \mathbf{1}\{\beta_i \geq \frac{1}{2}\}$$

for parties A and B respectively, i.e. the issue position on which the party's elected members cast the majority of their votes.[7]

Given the active issue i candidates running in district d from parties A and B choose α_i^d and β_i^d to maximize respectively

$$U_A(\alpha_i^d | i, \beta_i^d, \hat{\alpha}_i) = -(\hat{\alpha}_i - \alpha_i^d)^2 + w\Phi_A^d(i, \alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d)$$
$$U_B(\beta_i^d | i, \alpha_i^d, \hat{\beta}_i) = -(\hat{\beta}_i - \beta_i^d)^2 + w\Phi_B^d(i, \alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d)$$

taking as given the maximization choice of the other candidate. Here, $w > 0$ is a common weight put on the electoral motivation relative to the weight 1 that is put on voting in line with the party's ideal position.[8]

Finally, when they cast their ballots, all voters in all districts d have rational expectations of their candidates' choices of α_i^d and β_i^d if elected. We now give our equilibrium concept.

Definition 1. *A* party system equilibrium *is a tuple* $(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d)$ *such that*

1. *(issue-specification)* $i \in \mathcal{I}$ *is the active issue,*
2. *(Nash condition) for all districts* d*,*

$$\alpha_i^d \in \arg\max_{\tilde{\alpha}_i^d} U_A^d(\tilde{\alpha}_i^d | i, \beta_i^d, \hat{\alpha}_i) \text{ subject to } 0 \leq \tilde{\alpha}_i^d \leq 1$$
$$\beta_i^d \in \arg\max_{\tilde{\beta}_i^d} U_B^d(\tilde{\beta}_i^d | i, \alpha_i^d, \hat{\beta}_i) \text{ subject to } 0 \leq \tilde{\beta}_i^d \leq 1$$

3. *(minimal party differentiation)* $\alpha_i \neq \beta_i$.

[6] This assumption builds on a vast literature in which candidates are not motivated solely by probability of winning (e.g. Calvert, 1985, Wittman, 1983).

[7] Breaking ties in favor of position 1 when defining party positions will not affect our conclusions.

[8] In assuming the behavior of its elected members shapes a party's preferences, which in turn influences the behavior of its candidates, our model relates to the theory of "endogenous parties" developed in Roemer (2001); see also the references therein.

A party system equilibrium includes not just the profile of candidate choices (which must satisfy Nash optimization) but also a specification of which issue bundle is politically active. It must also meet the requirement that the parties be minimally different in the voting patterns of their members. Parties are coalitions that exist to pass legislation. In the absence of an opposing party voting against the preferred policies of a group of legislators on issue i, there is no reason for that group to organize as a party; consequently we would not expect issue i to be politically active when this is the case.

Proposition 1. *There exists a party system equilibrium where i is the active issue in every district if and only if*

$$\underline{\lambda} := \frac{1}{2}\left(1 - \frac{1}{w\varphi}\right) \leq \lambda_i < \frac{1}{2}\left(1 + \frac{1}{w\varphi}\right) =: \overline{\lambda}$$

In any such equilibrium, either $\alpha_i^d = l_i$ and $\beta_i^d = r_i$ for all d or $\alpha_i^d = r_i$ and $\beta_i^d = l_i$ for all d, where

$$l_i := \max\left\{0, w\varphi\left(\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2}\right)\right\} \quad \textit{and} \quad r_i := \min\left\{1, 1 - w\varphi\left(\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_i\right)\right\}$$

The proofs of this proposition and the next are given in Appendix A.

The *measured ideology* on issue i of an elected representative is the share of their roll call votes in favor of position 1. The mean measured ideology of the elected members of parties A and B are thus α_i and β_i respectively. We define *polarization* at a tuple $(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d)$, as the difference in the mean measured ideologies:

$$\Delta(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d) = |\alpha_i - \beta_i|$$

Next, we use the majority margin to measure the dominance of one party over the other. As $\Phi_B(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d) = 1 - \Phi_A(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d)$ the *majority margin* (in terms of both seats won and aggregate vote share) is

$$M(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d) = \left|\frac{1}{2} - \Phi_A(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d)\right|$$

Proposition 2. *In any party system equilibrium $(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d)$, polarization is*

$$\Delta(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d) = 1 - w\varphi\left|\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2}\right|$$

and the majority margin is

$$M(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d) = 2\varphi\left|\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2}\right|\left(1 - w\varphi\left|\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2}\right|\right)$$

Thus, polarization is decreasing while the majority margin is increasing with with $|\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2}|$ *for all* $\underline{\lambda} \leq \lambda_i < \overline{\lambda}$.

Therefore, when voter preferences tilt further in favor of the party that has taken the already more popular position, polarization declines while the electoral dominance of the favored party increases. Polarization and one-party dominance covary (negatively) as a result of these underlying changes in the voting population.

2.2 Polarization, Depolarization, and Party System Change

Our model is static and our results so far hold the active issue i in a party system equilibrium fixed, but the fact that the definition of a party system equilibrium includes a specification of the active issue bundle allows us to shed light on the conditions under which a change in the active issue must occur.

We study a simple parameterized example to illustrate some basic dynamics. Assume that $\mathcal{I} = \{o, n\}$ with the interpretation that o is the existing old issue bundle that is active, but may be replaced by a new issue bundle n if there ceases to exist an equilibrium with o as the active issue, but one exists with n as the active issue.

We maintain the assumption that $w > \frac{1}{\varphi}$, which guarantees that $0 < \underline{\lambda}$ and $\overline{\lambda} < 1$.

Suppose that time t runs continuously from 0 to 1. Assume that for each issue $i \in \mathcal{I}$, the value of λ_i at time t is

$$\lambda_i(t) = \lambda_i^0 + \mu_i t,$$

where λ_i^0 and μ_i are parameters, and for issue o we have $\lambda_o^0 \in (\underline{\lambda}, \frac{1}{2})$ and $\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_o^0 < \mu_o < 1 - \lambda_o^0$. Under these assumptions, a party system equilibrium exists with o as the active issue for all times $t \in [0, \bar{t})$ with $\bar{t} := (\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_o^0)/\mu_o$ but does not exist for any $t \in [\bar{t}, 1]$. Equilibrium polarization is increasing and the equilibrium majority margin is decreasing from time 0 to time $t_{1/2} := (\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_o^0)/\mu_o$; then equilibrium polarization is decreasing and the equilibrium majority margin is increasing from time $t_{1/2}$ to time $\bar{t}$. This observations follow straightforwardly from Propositions 1 and 2.

Next, consider the following two assumptions.

(A1) $0 < \frac{\underline{\lambda} - \lambda_n^0}{\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_o^0} \mu_o < \mu_n < \overline{\lambda} - \lambda_n^0$.

(A2) $-(\lambda_n^0 - \underline{\lambda}) < \mu_n < -\frac{\lambda_n^0 - \overline{\lambda}}{\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_o^0} < 0$.

Under (A1), $\lambda_n^0 < \underline{\lambda}$ and $\lambda_n(t)$ is increasing with t as $\mu_n > 0$. The times at which a party system equilibrium with active issue n exists are those in $((\underline{\lambda} - \lambda_n^0)/\mu_n, 1]$. We also have $(\underline{\lambda} - \lambda_n^0)/\mu_n < (\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_o^0)/\mu_o$ so that there is no time $t \in [0, 1]$ at which neither a party system equilibrium with active issue o exists nor does one with active issue n exist. Under (A2), $\lambda_n^0 > \overline{\lambda}$ and $\lambda_n(t)$ is decreasing with t as $\mu_n < 0$. The times at which a party system equilibrium with active issue n exists are those in $((\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_n^0)/\mu_n, 1]$. Since the assumption

implies $(\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_n^0)/\mu_n < (\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_o^0)/\mu_o$, a party system equilibrium again exists with one of the two issues active for all $t \in [0,1]$. In both cases, the fact that a party system equilibrium with issue n active does not exist at time $t = 0$ justifies the selection of o as the initially active issue, which remains active so long as it can be.

Under both possible assumptions, at the moment at which a party system equilibrium with o as the active issue ceases to exist and a switch occurs to a party system equilibrium with n as the newly active issue, there is an initial discontinuous upward jump in equilibrium polarization and drop in the majority margin. The following proposition summarizes.

Proposition 3. *Under both (A1) and (A2), a party system equilibrium exists with o as the active issue if and only if $t \in [0, \bar{t})$. In such an equilibrium, polarization is increasing while the majority margin is decreasing in t on the interval $[0, t_{1/2})$ and then polarization is decreasing while the majority margin is increasing in t on the interval $[t_{1/2}, \bar{t})$. For $t \in [\bar{t}, 1]$ a party system equilibrium exists with n as the active issue. At time $\bar{t}$ any switch from an equilibrium with o as the active issue to one with n as the active issue involves an upward jump in polarization and a downward jump in the majority margin.*

The proof of this result follows from the arguments above, so we omit it.

After the initial jump at time $\bar{t}$ when the party system equilibrium switches from o being the active issue to n being the newly active issue, what happens next with polarization and the majority margin depends on which of two of the following sub-cases hold.

(i) $(\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_n^0)/\mu_n > (\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_o^0)/\mu_o$

(ii) $(\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_n^0)/\mu_n < (\overline{\lambda} - \lambda_o^0)/\mu_o$

Under case (i), as soon as n becomes the newly active issue, polarization continues to increase while the majority margin continues to decline. Under case (ii), after the initial jump, polarization starts to decrease while the majority margin starts to increase.

Since a party system equilibrium with active issue i is unique up to a relabeling of the parties, we select at each time that it exists an equilibrium with active issue o in which $\alpha_o^d = l_o$ and $\beta_o^d = r_o$ for all d and when if it does not exist but an equilibrium with active issue n does exist, then the one with $\alpha_n^d = l_n$ and $\beta_n^d = r_n$ for all d. In the rest of this section, the term "equilibrium" refers to this selected equilibrium. In Figure 2 we depict the path of equilibrium polarization and the majority margin over time for each of the four cases $\{(\text{A1}), (\text{A2})\} \times \{(\text{i}), (\text{ii})\}$, with polarization in solid blue and the majority margin in dashed blue when A is advantaged as the majority party and polarization in solid red and the majority margin in dashed red when B is the advantaged majority party.[9]

[9]This means that party A is to the "left" of party R on both issues, but given that below we will treat the cases of $\lambda_n > 1/2$ and $\lambda_n < 1/2$ symmetrically, this is semantic: by redefining what the "policy" is, either we can interpret opposition to a policy in the legislature as a no vote and support as a yes vote, or we can interpret opposition to it as a yes vote and support as a no vote.

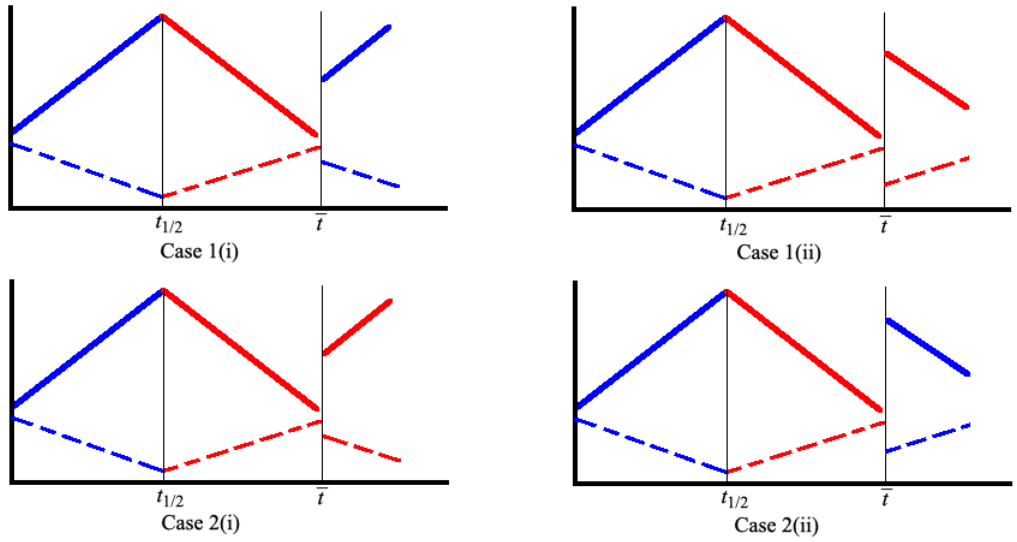

Figure 2: Polarization in solid blue and red lines and the majority margin in dashed blue and red lines for the four cases $\{1,2\} \times \{(\text{i}),(\text{ii})\}$ described in the text. Time t is on the x-axis. Blue lines correspond to party A being the majority party and red lines to party B.

In all four cases, party A is the majority party whose advantage is declining over time from time 0 to time $t_{1/2}$ while o is the active issue. During this period, party A is cohesive as all of its elected members cast all their roll call votes for position 0 on issue o, while party B is the less cohesive party as its elected members cast a share $w\varphi(\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_o(t))$ of their roll votes for position 0, dissenting from the party's majority position of 1 at each time t in this period. Then from time $t_{1/2}$ to time $\bar{t}$, party B becomes the advantaged party with a majority that is increasing over time. It is now the cohesive party with all of its members voting for position 1 on all roll call votes, and party A becomes the less cohesive party as its members cast a share $w\varphi(\lambda_o(t) - \frac{1}{2})$ of their roll call votes against their party's majority preferred position of 0 at each time t in this period.

In case ((A1),(i)) at the moment $\bar{t}$ that the new issue n replaces the old issue o, the advantage switches back from party B to party A, which is then cohesive on the new issue n against party B which is less cohesive. But its advantage is declining while the cohesiveness of party B on the new issue is increasing after this moment. In case ((A1),(ii)), party B retains the majority after switching to the new issue, and its advantage grows as polarization declines following the initial jump at time $\bar{t}$. It also remains the more cohesive party.

In case ((A2),(i)), party B's majority advantage declines suddenly at time $\bar{t}$ and continues to decline after this moment, but it still remains the advantaged and more cohesive party even on the new issue n. But eventually at a time $(\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_n^0)/\mu_n$ the advantage could switch to the other party on the new issue. In case ((A2),(ii)), party B's majority advantage suddenly

switches at time $\bar{t}$ to an advantage for party A that steadily grows as polarization on the new issue declines in party A's favor. In this case B switches suddenly from being the cohesive party on issue o to the less cohesive party on n.

2.3 Comments

We summarize the main observations emerging from our analysis of the simple homogenous districts model above, as follows:

1. Polarization is highest when there is electoral parity, and lowest when there is majority-party dominance.
2. If one of the parties becomes politically dominant on the existing issue bundle, a new issue cleavage emerges.
3. The minority party's cohesion on the old issue declines as polarization declines.
4. Electoral parity and dominance stem from the composition of the electorate: an increase in the share of voters who support an issue will—if large enough—lead to one-party dominance, depolarization, and a change of issues.
5. The model does not predict which party will win out on the new issue, nor whether polarization will increase or decrease over time after the switch of issues.

Although we do not model issue change as a deliberate choice made by the parties, it is easy to imagine that a party's emphasis on issues would respond to changes in its electoral fortunes. If a party simply cannot compete on the current set of issues, it must either adopt the position of the other party, at which point it loses its political identity, or it must change the issues that it runs on, else risk perpetual exclusion from power. When we look more closely at the historical cases of depolarization below we see exactly this dynamic at play.

3 The First Party System

3.1 Polarization and Depolarization

Sharp divisions between the Federalist and Democratic-Republican factions emerged during a period when their members were serving together in the George Washington administration, setting the stage for polarization between the two parties following 1796. Washington had sought to incorporate a wide range of figures into his government precisely to preempt the growth of "faction." However, the rivalry between Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton could not be repressed, eventually boiling over into the congressional and vice-presidential elections of 1792. Around this time, two political

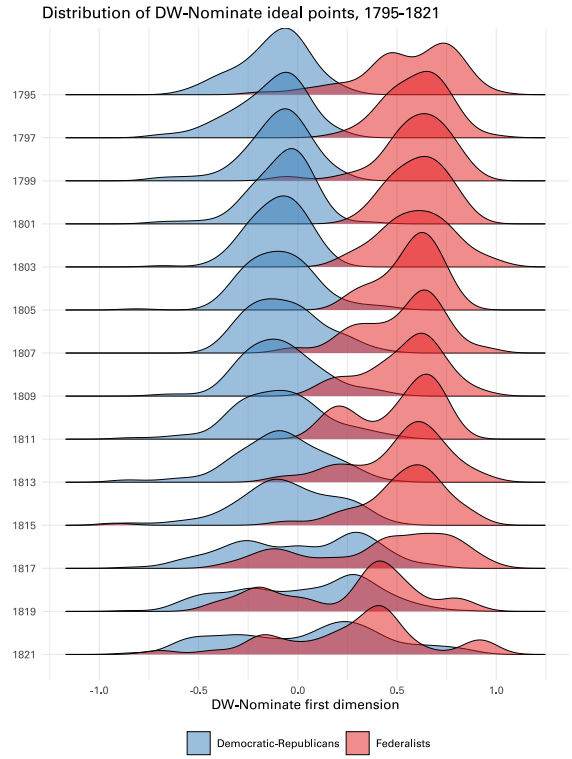

Figure 3: Distribution of DW-Nominate first-dimension ideal points for Congresses from 1795–1821.

organizations and patronage networks began to crystalize, and newspapers (themselves fiercely partisan in this period) began to use the terms "Republican" and "Federalist." By 1798, Jefferson could tell a correspondent that "two political sects have arisen within the U.S. ... called federalists, sometimes aristocrats or monocrats, and sometimes Tories ... [others called] Republicans, Whigs, Jacobins, anarchists, disorganizers, etc. These terms are in familiar use with most persons" (Thorpe, 1898, p. 488).

Figure 3 shows the distribution of DW-Nominate ideal points across the two parties in the early 19th century, indicating that the parties were most polarized at the start of the 1800s but by 1820 the Federalists (or what was left of their party by then) were virtually indistinguishable from the Democratic-Republicans in terms of the voting patterns of their members in roll calls. Figure 4 provides further evidence for this, showing the shares of votes of members of each party that agreed with the majority of members of Democratic-Republicans (left panel) and the majority of Federalists (right panel). Additionally, Figure D.2 in the Appendix shows how the share of votes on which the majorities of the two parties disagreed with each other plummeted after 1812.

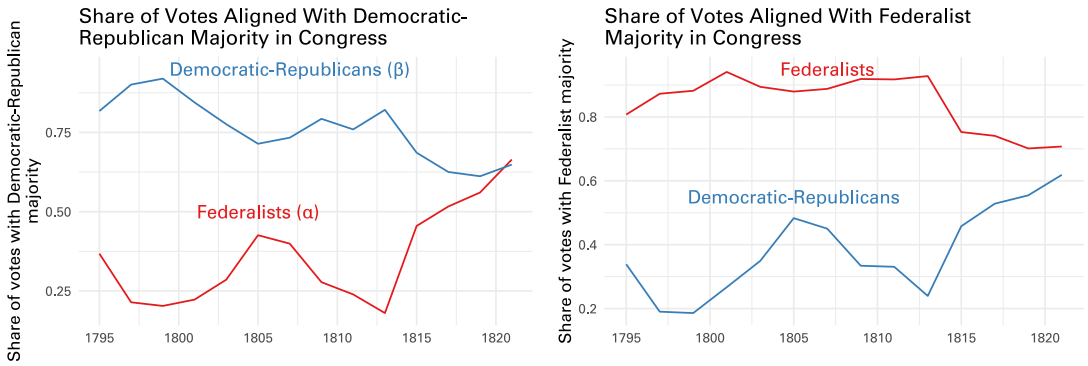

Figure 4: The bottom left panel is the share of roll call votes by members of the Democratic-Republican and Federalist parties that were in agreement with the majority of Democratic-Republican members voting on the bill in question. The right panel shows the same for agreement with the majority of Federalist members.

From these figures we cannot tell which party's positions the majorities of the two parties started to agree on after they started voting together, but it was the Democratic-Republicans who won the policy debates as their party became politically dominant. Prior to 1820, the two parties were polarized on issues pertaining to the judiciary, constitutional amendments, banking, foreign policy, and religion—a claim that is supported quantitatively in Figure 6 below. The parties' disagreement on many of these issues stemmed from fundamental disagreements on the legacy of the American Revolution and the meaning of the new constitution. Federalists believed in a strong federal government and were skeptical of the devolution of power from elites to the broader citizenry. The Democratic Republicans believed in weak central government and robust popular participation in politics.

On banking, for example, the Federalists, led by Hamilton, had advocated for the establishment of national bank to help stabilize the national economy and manage government finances. The Republicans, led by Jefferson and Madison, had opposed the creation of such a bank, calling it unconstitutional and fearing that it would concentrate power in the hands of the federal government and Northern elites at the expense of state governments and Southern farmers. The debate was initially won by the Federalists when Washington established the First National Bank in 1791 with a 20 year charter. But in 1811 the Republican position prevailed as Madison allowed the charter to expire. Only after the War of 1812 did the Federalists recognize the advantage of such a bank to help finance the war, and Madison created the Second National Bank in 1816, also with a 20 year charter, despite opposition from within his party. However, the attempt to preemptively renew the Second Bank's charter in the 1830s was opposed by anti-elite Jacksonian Democrats, and despite passage in Congress, Jackson who had long been an opponent of the national bank vetoed the recharter bill in 1832, ultimately dismantling the Second Bank and shifting the country to a

decentralized banking system that would remain in place until the creation of the Federal Reserve in the 20th century.

The two parties also clashed over the judiciary. The Federalists advocated for a strong and independent federal judiciary to serve as a check on the executive and legislative branches of government. The Republicans on the other hand feared that a strong judiciary would serve as an instrument by which elites could undermine popular will. Particularly contentious was the Judiciary Act of 1801 that allowed Adams to reduce the number of Supreme Court justices to limit Jefferson's appointments, and created and filled 16 new judgeships (the "midnight judges") to secure Federalist influence. As soon as Jefferson took office the Republicans quickly repealed this act and appointed their own judges to various courts. They continued to do so through the period that they held power. Therefore, although the Federalist vision of a strong and independent judicial branch would ultimately prevail, the Republicans succeeded in reshaping the judiciary in the short term.[10]

The debates on foreign policy and religion, two other highly polarizing issues, were also eventually won by the Republicans. On foreign policy, the Federalists favored closer relations with Britain while Republicans favored closer relations with France. The Republicans eventually prevailed in this debate, in a series of foreign policy bills that culminated in their 1812 declaration of war on Britain.[11] The war, supported by Westerners who hoped for the annexation of Canada, was bitterly opposed by the Federalists with Federalist governors refusing to mobilize their militias to help the war effort, and Massachusetts Governor Caleb Strong sending a secret mission to discuss a separate peace with Britain. On religion, the Democratic-Republicans argued fervently for separation between church and state, opposing the established churches favored by the Federalists and appealing to minority dominations.[12] Eventually, on the issue of state-supported churches, the Republicans prevailed again as these churches were gradually dismantled by the 1830s.

Polarization between the two parties during this period, as in our own, involved violent antipathies among both voters and elites. Both sides freely accused the other of treason, with Jefferson advising French diplomats to avoid dealing with Adams, while Hamilton had earlier attempted to encourage the British to negotiate with him rather than Secretary of State Jefferson. Republicans accused Adams and the Federalists of being monarchists

[10] In the case of the midnight judges, the Jefferson administration had attempted to prevent the appointees from taking office by withholding their commissions. The Supreme Court then ruled in *Marbury v. Madison* that the Jefferson administration could not lawfully withhold these commissions, but it also concluded that it lacked the jurisdiction to compel the executive branch to grant these commissions, and not all of the midnight judges—including the plaintiff in the case, William Marbury—were able to take office. Even those that did were eventually removed after the 1801 act creating their offices was repealed. Moreover, the Supreme Court's power to overturn Federal law would remain theoretical as no Federal statute was ruled unconstitutional until 1856, further justifying our claim that the Republicans prevailed in the short term.

[11] One example of such a bill that preceded the War of 1812 was the Embargo Act (1807-08), which was designed to punish British attacks on American merchantmen by forbidding trade—a policy that had the convenient feature of having its cost borne by the overwhelmingly Federalist shipowners.

[12] On the link between Federalism and the established churches of New England see Sassi (2001).

that betrayed America's founding principles, and the Federalists accused the Republicans of Jacobinism (Smelser, 1958). Particularly vitriolic were the debates around the Alien and Sedition Acts passed by a Federalist Congress at the height of the Quasi-War with France, that allowed the imprisonment of non-citizens deemed "dangerous" and criminalized making "false statements" about federal officials. In response, the Republican leadership encouraged the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, which declared that state legislatures had the power to nullify federal laws. It was also during this period that the Republicans conducted what is still the only impeachment trial of a Supreme Court justice in U.S. history—that of Samuel Chase—though he was acquitted by the Senate.

Describing the affective animosities of this period, Gordon Wood (2009) writes that "families broke up over politics, and employers dismissed their employees because of party differences." One federalist commented on hearing of the death of a Republican neighbor that "another God damned Democrat has gone to hell, and I wish they were all there" (quoted in Wood, 2009). Historical accounts have also emphasized the acrimony surrounding the 1800 election, regarded as one of the most acrimonious in American history (Ferling, 2004). Republicans decried "the reign of terror created by false alarms, to promote domestic feud and foreign war" while the Federalists posed the question as a choice between "God—and a religious president" or "Jefferson—and no God" (quoted in Lepore, 2013, pp. 7-8).

3.2 Party Competition and Democratic-Republican Dominance

Polarization between the two parties peaked when electoral competition between them was fierce. Between 1790 and 1802, the Federalists and Republicans competed on equal terms. Each party (or its predecessor faction) won three of the six congressional elections. In the two contested presidential elections, Adams won in 1796 with only one more electoral vote than was required for a majority, while in 1800 Jefferson won with only three votes more than needed for a majority after a decisive switch by the "swing state" of New York. While various distortions in the system of representation existed by modern standards, these did not seem to have given either side a decisive advantage. The Federalists, as the party of elites probably benefited more than the Republicans from the franchise restrictions common in the period and the malapportionment of state legislatures, but this advantage was not always large and was counterbalanced by advantages given to the Republicans by the Constitution's three-fifths clause and the electoral college (Broussard, 1999, Lampi, 2013)

After 1802, the Federalists started to decline. The party never won control of the presidency or a house of Congress after 1800. In fact, after this year, the Federalists never won more than 37% of House seats, 31% of Senate seats, and 41% of the electoral vote—and this total, in 1812, was only attained after they nominated a disgruntled Northern Republican, DeWitt Clinton, who resented the monopoly of the "Virginia Dynasty" over his party. Usually, the defeats were even more crushing. In four of the ten elections in this

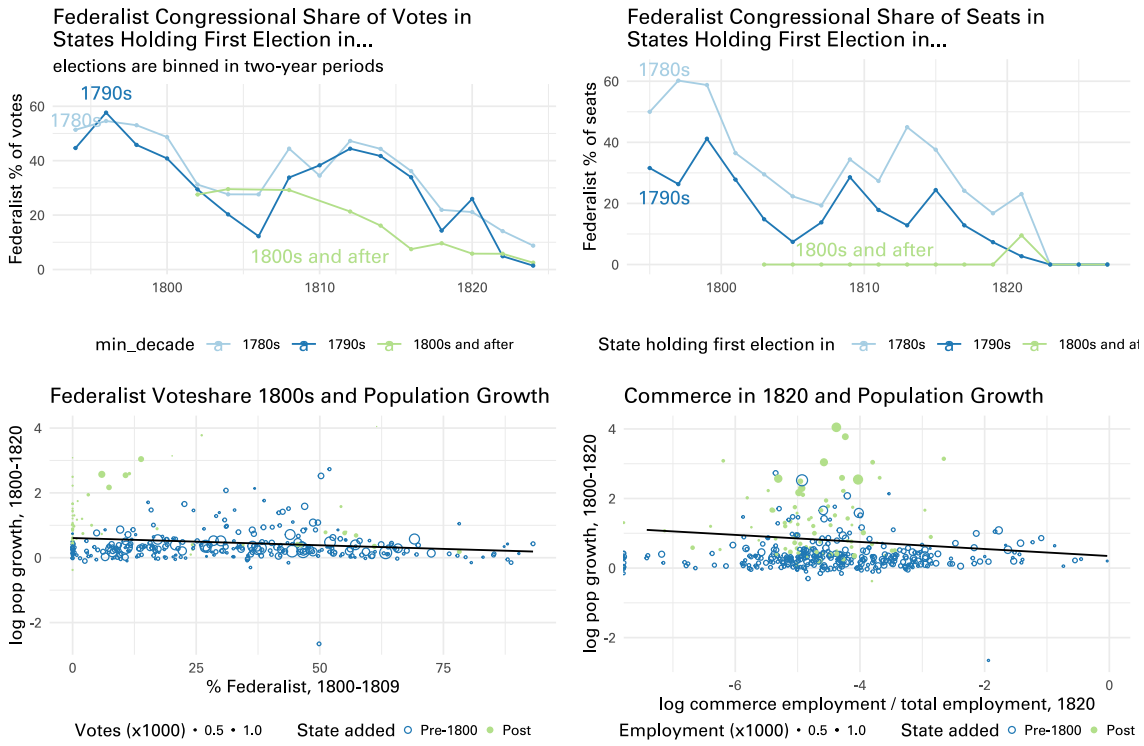

Figure 5: The Collapse of the Federalists. The upper left panel shows that the Federalists won a smaller share of votes, and the upper right panel shows they won a much smaller share of seats, from states joining the union after 1800. Data in the upper left panel are from Lampi (2007), and in the upper right panel are from Lewis et al. (2021). The bottom left panel shows the relationship between the Federalist share of votes for Congressional candidates 1800–1809 and the change in log population between 1800 and 1820, weighted by votes for all congressional candidates 1800–1809. The bottom right panel shows the relationship between log employment in commerce in 1820 divided by employment in commerce, agriculture and manufacturing—the only sectors reported in the 1820 census—and 1800–1820 population growth, weighted by 1820 employment. The data for the bottom two panels are from Lampi (2007) and Haines and ICPSR (2005). We use 1820 employment data as that is the first year in which the census asked about employment.

period the Federalists failed to win 20% of House seats. Increasingly, the Federalists became a regional party. Only in the 1812 presidential election did they succeed in winning states outside Delaware and New England. After these defeats, the national party organization, never especially strong, tended to atrophy from defeat and lack of patronage, leaving a disconnected set of state organizations (Wilentz, 2006).

The demise of the Federalists was even more rapid during Monroe's first term. In 1815 all the governors in New England were Federalists, but by 1819 only one was. 1816 would be the last election in which the party would bother to put up a presidential candidate, and

Monroe won unopposed in 1820. A few Federalists continued in Congress until after the 1824 election, but their support was split among a variety of Republican candidates.

Why did the Federalists collapse? One factor appears to be their lack of popularity in newly incorporated areas. Rapid settlement of the frontier added new voting regions that were disposed to support the Republicans. The upper panels of Figure 5 show the decline of the Federalists in terms of both Congressional vote- and seat-shares disaggregated by states that held their first election in the decade of the 1780s, the 1790s and 1800s. The top left panel shows that states holding their first elections in the 1790s or later tended to be less supportive of the Federalists than pre-existing states. The top right panel shows that the Federalists failed to win a single seat in places that held their first Congressional election after 1800, except in 1822 when two Federalist members of Congress were elected in Maine. The decline of the Federalists in presidential voting was even starker: no Federalist presidential candidate won a state that was added after 1796 (Leip, 2023), and the share of electoral college votes from states with property restrictions on the franchise (a position associated with the Federalists, and where they were expected to be strongest) declined from over 75% in 1796 to under 60% by 1816 (Keyssar, 2000).[13]

While their lack of support in newly added regions was important, the upper panels of Figure 5 also show how the Federalists declined in all voting areas. Their New England base was in demographic decline, selecting 28.7% of the electoral college in 1792 but only 19.5% in 1820. At the presidential level, the states the Adams won in 1796 would not have given them an electoral college victory after the 1800 reapportionment. In fact, in 1812 DeWitt Clinton was heavily defeated in the electoral college despite almost exactly replicating Adam's electoral map.[14]

Moreover, even in their strongholds, immigration and differential birthrates reduced the relative size of the Federalists' Congregationalist and Episcopalian support base. In 1780, there were approximately 740 Congregationalist and 450 Baptist churches in America, while by 1850 the respective numbers were 1725 and 9376. Similarly, Episcopalians went from 380 to 1459 while Methodists rose from 0 to 13,302.[15] The bottom left panel of Figure 5 shows that areas that had voted Federalist in the 1800s also experienced slower population growth. This pattern reflected changes in the structure of the economy. Merchants were a key components of the Federalist coalition, but as the bottom right panel of Figure 5 shows, areas dependent on commerce also grew at a slower rate.

[13]McCormick (1959, 406), taking advantage of a New York reform that changed the qualifications for different offices at different times, estimates that the Republicans won 55% of voters on the old freehold qualification and 57% of the new voters, which in fact may be an underestimate due to widespread evasion. As a result, Federalist legislators were in general more supportive of franchise restrictions based on property than were Republicans, though Republicans tended to be more enthusiastic about racial restrictions (Branagan, 2018, Moeller, 2011).

[14]Unlike Adams, Clinton lost Vermont and 6 of 11 Maryland electors. Adams also carried three electors in other states, which were decisive in his win.

[15]See Gaustad (1976, 12-5) and USA (1870, Table XVII).

The Federalists understood well that these structural changes in the voting population threatened their political survival. They opposed the Louisiana purchase in part because it would add new Republican-voting areas to the country (Wood, 2009, pp. 369-72). In the Senate, every Republican supported the purchase, while every Federalist opposed it on at least one roll call. In 1814, one of proposals of the Hartford Convention (a gathering of Federalists attempting to craft a response to the War of 1812) included a two thirds requirement for the admission of new states—an obvious attempt to limit the admission of frontier areas where Federalist support was among the weakest (Buel, 2015).

Ultimately, however, the Federalists were unsuccessful in preventing their demise, and Democratic-Republican dominance emerged.

3.3 Issue Change and Transition to a New Party System

The initial Federalist reaction to Republican dominance was an intensification of partisanship, particularly in their New England strongholds. They opposed all Republican policies to the point of urging civil disobedience and disunion. Republicans accused them of wishing "to rule the nation if they could, and see it damned if others should" (Hill, 1835, p. 35). But in the face of crushing electoral losses many Federalists, such as John Quincy Adams, who were driven by "classical republicanism and ambition" started to join the Republicans as early as the Jefferson administration (Thompson, 1991, p. 163).

The willingness of Federalists to work with Republicans was of limited consequence in resolving their disputes over policy, however, as many Republicans became reluctant to compromise as their power grew. Republican presidential candidates in 1816 accused each other of ties with the Federalists, and President Monroe refused to appoint any self-identified Federalists to office, a policy he would continue throughout his administration (Morgan, 1972). Instead, he sought to make political inroads into enemy territory under the guise of his 1817 Goodwill Tour of New England, and in the 1818 midterm elections the Democratic-Republicans made significant gains in the region, flipping all nine congressional seats from Connecticut and Rhode Island, and four out of the twenty in Massachusetts, giving them a majority in the delegation of what was once the most pro-Federalist state.

It was not until new issues emerged that a reconfiguration of electoral coalitions took place, restoring parity among the main competing factions. While the judiciary, banking, foreign policy, and religion were among the most polarizing issues in the 1800s, Figure 6 shows that by the 1820s issues like slavery, infrastructure spending (public works) and tariffs became more polarizing than they previously were, creating new political cleavages that cut even within the dominant Democratic-Republican party.

To create this figure we estimate issue-specific ideal points using the algorithm developed by Imai, Lo and Olmsted (2016) based on issue classifications of bills by Poole and Rosenthal (1991), the details of which are provided in Appendix B; see also the note below Figure 6. The upper panel of the figure compares change in polarization between the Adams and Jackson

factions of the Democratic-Republican Party in the 1820s against polarization between the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties in the 1800s issue-by-issue. The figure shows a clear "downward" pattern, revealing that the issues that were most polarizing in the 1800s were among the least polarizing in the 1820s, and vice versa; and that the issues that were most polarizing in the 1800s declined in importance.[16]

The bottom panel of the figure shows how several of the most polarizing issues declined in importance as the Democratic-Republicans became dominant between the 1800s and 1820s. A smaller number of roll calls were taken on matters associated with the judiciary, constitutional amendments, and treaties while the number of roll calls on the tariff, infrastructure spending (public works) and especially slavery increased as these issues gained salience.[17]

In creating this figure, we focus on intra-party polarization within the Democratic-Republican Party in the 1820s because the Federalist Party had already collapsed and new political divisions were entirely within the Democratic-Republican Party before the emergence of the Whigs. In this sense, the figure shows decreasing party cohesion from the Democratic-Republicans factionalizing on issues that increase in importance.

The main issue around slavery was whether newly admitted states would allow it. This issue split the Democratic-Republican coalition down the middle. The Southern faction of the party took the pro-slavery position, advocating for the expansion of slaveholding in the new states of the West. John Calhoun from South Carolina, who was vice president under John Quincy Adams, was among the leaders of this faction. In contrast, the Northern faction of the Republicans opposed the expansion of slavery, and even took a mild pro-emancipation stance, arguing for a gradual transition to free labor. During the Monroe administration, the debate over the admission of Missouri as a slave state erupted in bitter and almost entirely within-party controversy, only resolved after a hasty compromise.

The debate over tariffs and public spending also coincided with a geographic divide within the Democratic Republican party. Protectionists argued for tariffs not just to protect the fledgling manufacturing industries concentrated in the North from foreign competition but also to finance public infrastructure projects such as the building of roads and canals that would support trade by connect the growing West with the eastern seaboard. Leaders like Henry Clay of Kentucky advocated for the "American System," a plan for the economic development of America that would be led by the government through public works projects.

[16]This pattern is preserved in Appendix Figure D.5, in which we take a nonparametric approach to measure partisan divergence as the difference in rates of voting with the dominant party (i.e., the Democratic-Republicans) on votes on which the majorities of the two parties took opposing sides—though in this figure slavery appears to become the most polarizing issue in the 1820s from being the last polarizing in the 1800s, while tariffs (which become the most polarizing issue according to Figure 6) become less polarizing than treaties and religion but still more polarizing than the judiciary and banking.

[17]The number of roll calls on banking (including the National Bank) however increased, but as we mentioned in the previous section the Democratic-Republicans had come around to at least temporarily recognizing the importance of a national bank following the War of 1812.

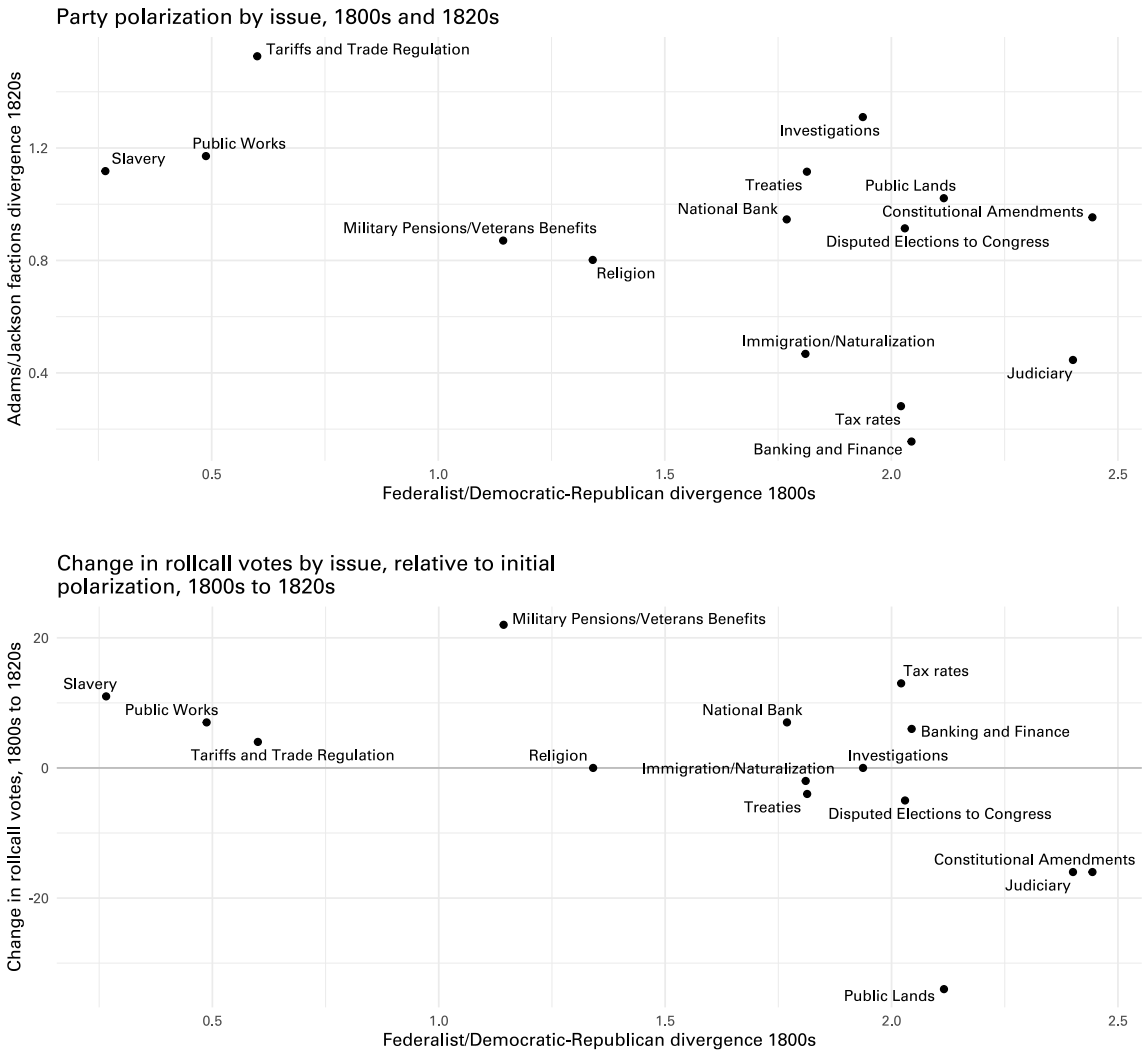

Figure 6: Initial polarization, depolarization, and changes in issue salience during the First Party System. The top figure shows the partisan difference in ideal points by issue, between the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties in the 1801-1809 period and between the Adams and Jackson (including Crawford) factions in the 1821-1829 period. We separately estimate ideal points for each issue in the first 25 Congresses, and rotate ideal points so that the Federalist average is higher than the Democratic-Republican average; see Appendix B for more details. The bottom figure shows change in the number of roll call votes on an issue between the 1801-1809 and 1821-1829 periods, plotted against the difference in average ideal points between the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in the 1801-1809 period.

Most southerners, on the other hand, advocated for free trade, arguing that trade barriers would hurt the plantation economy which relied on exports for income.[18] At the same time, they were skeptical of Clay's American System, seeing most of the benefits of these policies going to the North and West and the costs falling disproportionately on the South.

These divisions eventually split the Democratic-Republicans, ending the Era of Good Feelings, and leading to the Second Party System. The 1824 election featured four candidates with distinct ideologies and regional bases, all with impeccable Republican credentials and high positions in the Monroe administration: Adams, Jackson, Clay and William Crawford, the choice of the Republican congressional caucus. The eventual choice of Adams by the House of Representatives would define the lines of conflict for the next generation between the supporters of Jackson and his Whig opponents.

From the original Democratic-Republican party emerged the Democratic Party led by Jackson, and the National Republican Party, which would evolve into the Whig Party led by Clay. The Democrats found their greatest support in the South, but their coalition included some notable Northern leaders such as Martin van Buren of New York. The National Republicans and Whigs on the other hand were relatively more popular in the North and West, and included many ex-Federalists, such as Daniel Webster and John Quincy Adams.[19] American politics then commenced a new era of renewed polarization, divided on issues like the tariff, infrastructure spending, and perhaps most importantly slavery, which would come to a head in the coming decades as the nation hurled towards civil war.

4 The Third and Fourth Party Systems

4.1 Polarization and Depolarization

Along with Figure 1 and Appendix Figure D.1, Figure 7 shows that polarization during the Third and Fourth Party Systems peaked around 1900 before starting to decline. The two panels of Figure 8 show that this decline can be associated with changes in the voting patterns of elected members of the two parties. These figures show that both parties were relatively cohesive throughout this period, voting with the majority of their party always

[18] The Tariff of Abominations, passed in 1828 intensified the divisions between these factions, leading to the nullification crisis in which the state of South Carolina attempted to nullify the law.

[19] Though the Whig coalition did include some former Republicans such as Clay—and county level support for Whigs is uncorrelated with historical support for Federalists (upper left panel of Appendix Figure D.3)—it is reasonable to think of the Whig Party as being somewhat of a successor to the failed Federalist Party. Whigs performed well in counties with the kinds of characteristics of Federalist strongholds in the 1800s. They won more votes in places with more manufacturing (upper right panel of Figure D.3), fewer votes in those experiencing rapid population growth (bottom left panel), and more votes in areas with greater commerce (bottom right panel). Economic changes and frontier expansion meant that areas that had been on the frontier in the 1800s were denser and less agricultural by the 1840s, giving Whig politicians who were formerly Federalist (or at least Federalist-leaning) a fresh opportunity to do well in these places.

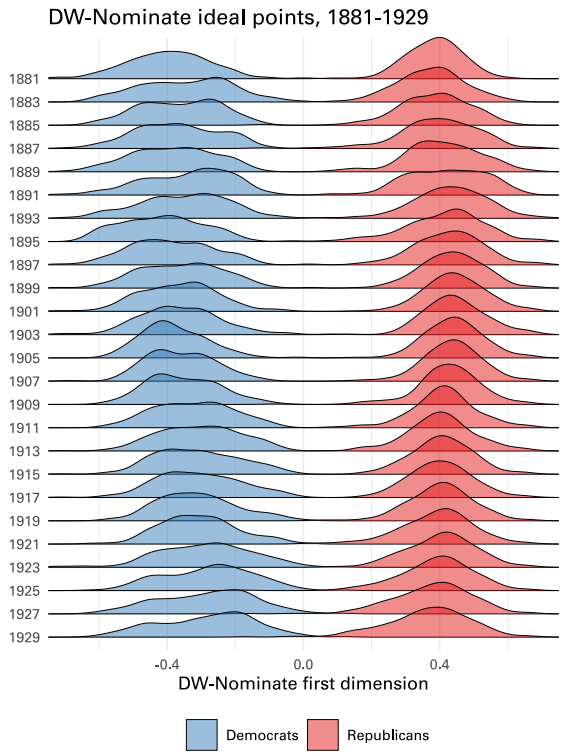

Figure 7: Distribution of DW-Nominate first-dimension ideal points for Congresses starting 1901–1949.

more than 75% of the time, but members of each party start to vote with the majority of the other party somewhat more frequently after 1900 as the share of bills on which the majorities of the two parties vote in opposition to each other drops after the turn of the century; on this, see the right panel of Appendix Figure D.2.

What were the issues on which the parties polarized? During the Civil War and Reconstruction, a major division was over states' rights and the rights of Black Americans. Republicans remained throughout the period the less racially intolerant party, though over time the party's appeals to the Civil War became more abstract and historical (Perman, 2003). In the Compromise of 1877 (the "Corrupt Bargain"), they gave in to Democrats' demands to remove federal troops from the South in exchange for ensuring Rutherford Hayes's election to the presidency. This enabled southern Democrat "redeemers" to regain control of the South, putting in place one-party rule via Black vote suppression under Jim Crow, which would last more than half a century (Mickey, 2015, Acharya, Blackwell and Sen, 2018). In 1880, an estimated 45% of eligible Blacks voted in Mississippi and 81% in North Carolina but by 1912 only 2% of southern Blacks voted (Redding and James, 2001, 148). Losses in the Supreme Court in the Civil Rights Cases of 1883 that struck down the

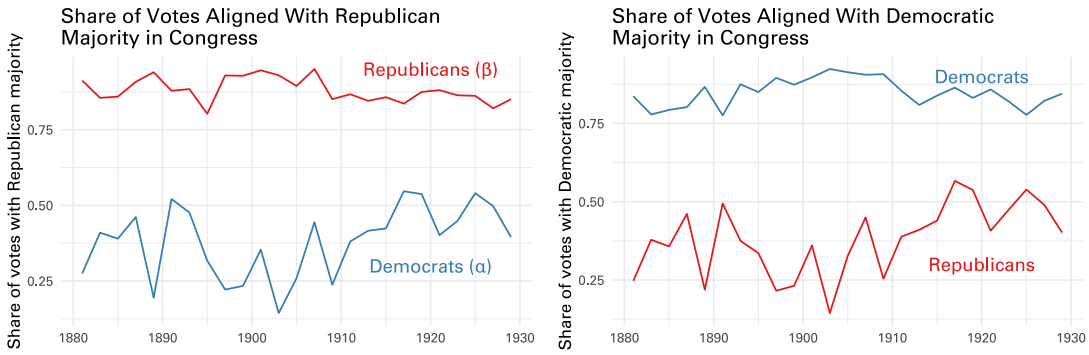

Figure 8: The left panel shows the share of roll call votes by members of the Republican and Democratic parties that were in agreement with the majority of Republican members. The right panel shows the same for agreement with the majority of Democrats.

Civil Rights Act of 1875 also made Republicans loath to further take up issues relating to civil rights and Reconstruction, though congressional votes on these issues continued past the end of the Reconstruction era.[20]

Instead, in the 1880s and 1890s, the Republicans turned to the concerns of their Northern industrial base. As the party of urban workers and industrialists, they favored protectionism, supporting high tariffs—the main source of government revenue in this period; see Figure 14 below—to protect American industries from foreign competition and to fund an extensive system of pensions for Union Civil War veterans (Skocpol, 1995). The Democrats opposed both and sought to lower tariffs and end pensions (Reitano, 2010).[21] Democrats in this period were a coalition of agrarian interests, so their opposition to tariffs and support for

[20]For example, the Lodge Bill of 1890, which aimed to protect the voting rights of Southern Blacks by providing federal oversight of elections was filibustered by Southern Democrats after passing in the House. Attempts to pass anti-lynching legislation in the 1920s were similarly blocked by Southern Democrats. On the flipside, Democrats succeeded in repealing the Enforcement Acts in 1884. These acts, passed during Reconstruction, had provided federal protections to the voting rights of Southern Blacks.

[21]On pensions, for example, Republicans overcame Democratic opposition to pass the Dependent and Disability Pension Act (1890) and the Sherwood Pension Act (1912), which provided pensions to Union veterans. On tariffs, they passed a number of protectionist bills during this period despite fierce opposition from Democrats—for example, they passed the McKinley Tariff (1890) which raised average duties on imports to 48.4%, the Dingley Tariff (1897), which raised the average tariffs to 52%, the highest it had ever been, and in later years the Payne-Aldrich Tariff (1909), and the Emergency Tariff (1921). While some Southern Democrats supported these bills (because they protected sugar and textile interests in their districts) most voted against. Other major tariff legislation included the Fordney-McCumber Tariff (1922) and the Smoot-Hawley Tariff (1930) which saw strong opposition from the majority of Democrats. At the same time, the Democrats generally failed to pass their own anti-tariff bills into law—for example, they presented the Simmons-Long Tariff Bill in 1929 as an alternative to Smoot-Hawley, which would have lowered tariffs on agricultural goods, but the bill failed without reaching a vote in either chamber.

free trade could be considered natural in a time when America's comparative advantage lay in agriculture (Postel, 2007, Sanders, 1999).[22]

Another divisive issue as polarization was peaking around the turn of the century was monetary policy. Many Democrats argued for bimetallism—the idea that U.S. currency should be backed both by gold and silver—while Republicans stood firmly behind the gold standard. Bimetallist Democrats believed that adding silver would increase the supply of money and help farmers by improving their access to credit and lowering their debt. Republicans, representing the interests of business and industry, argued that maintaining the gold standard would stabilize the economy and curb inflation. Bimetallist Democrats from the South and West won a significant legislative battle with the passage of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act (1890), but after the Panic of 1893 the Act was repealed by Northern Republicans with support from some pro-gold Democrats. After McKinley's narrow win against William Jennings Bryan in the presidential election of 1896, pro-gold Republicans took control of monetary policy and the issue of bimetallism was finally put to rest with the passage of the Gold Standard Act (1900) that formalized gold as the only metal backing U.S. currency. Nevertheless, debates over currency and monetary policy continued well into the 20th century, leading to the creation of the Federal Reserve in 1913.

The Gilded Age was a period of intense affective partisanship. As in the case of the First Party System, the press was fiercely partisan and did not hesitate to print scurrilous accounts of the other party. The Democratic-leaning *Chicago Free Press* described the Republican Party as "this monster of frightful mien ... the rabble of discord and destruction" while Republican opponents attacked "rebel Democrats" and the "ineffable meanness" of their "demagogical appeals" (quoted in Kaplan, 2001, pp. 38-41). Other Republican orators described the Democratic Party as "a common sewer and loathsome receptacle, into which is emptied every element of treason North and South, and every element of inhumanity and barbarism which has dishonored the age" (quoted in Gould, 2003, p. 57).

At the mass level, voter turnout records were set throughout the period, even with the disenfranchisement of Blacks. In the 1876 presidential election, 82% of voters turned out. Voting rates remained high in subsequent elections, often hovering around 80%. Votes were cast proudly in public. As Peskin (1984) writes:

> Crossover voting was rare; "independents" were scorned. To a degree unmatched since, party loyalty was a test of manhood; partisan allegiance represented a means of self-identification. To be a Republican or to be a Democrat—these were not lightly-made decisions but were shaped by self-interest, ethnicity, and, above all, history, most notably the polarizing trauma of the Civil War. (p. 703)

[22]Quantitative evidence that farmers tended to support Democrats while industrialists and workers tended to be Republican is hard to come by, as public opinion surveys do not go back long enough to reach this period. But using data from voter directories in Indiana in the 1870s and California in the 1910s, Scheve and Serlin (2024) show that farmers were more likely to be Democrats.

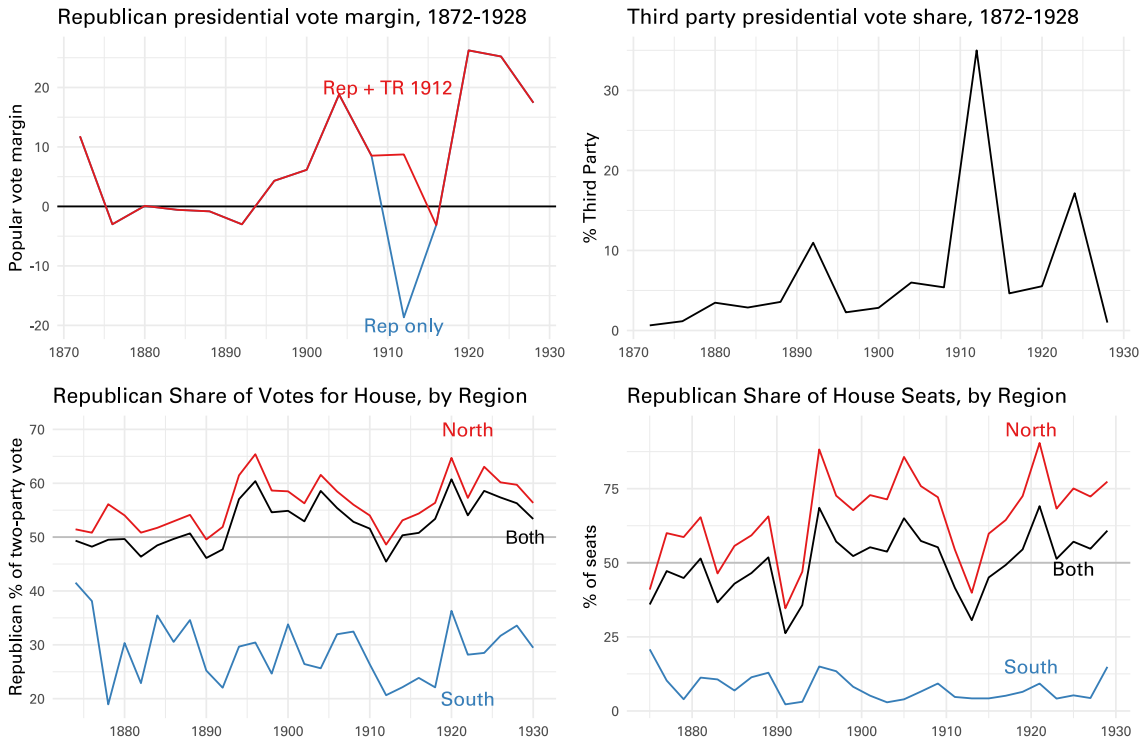

Figure 9: The top left panel shows the difference in the Republican and Democratic presidential popular vote share and the; the parties were evenly matched in the 1880s but not after 1896. The top right shows the share of the presidential popular vote won by third parties. The largest spikes, in 1912 and 1924 are for Republican-aligned Progressives. The bottom left panel shows the Republican share of the two-party vote in congressional elections, separated by region. The bottom right shows the Republican share of seats in Congress, again separated by region. We defined the South as the states of the Confederacy plus Oklahoma and Kentucky, and North as all other states.

4.2 Party Competition and Republican Dominance

The period between 1876 and 1894 was a period of tight political competition. Of the five presidential elections in this period, Republicans won three and Democrats won two. These elections were extremely close. In no case did the leader win by more than 3 percentage points of the popular vote. In 1880, 1884 and 1888, a switch of fewer than 11,000 votes in New York would have changed the outcome of the election. Control of Congress was typically split—a product of Republican advantage in small Western states. Democrats controlled the House for 14 years out of 18, but the Senate for only four.

The 1896 election is often cited as marking a major change in the structure of American party competition (Burnham, 1970). A third party, the Populists, had emerged emphasizing

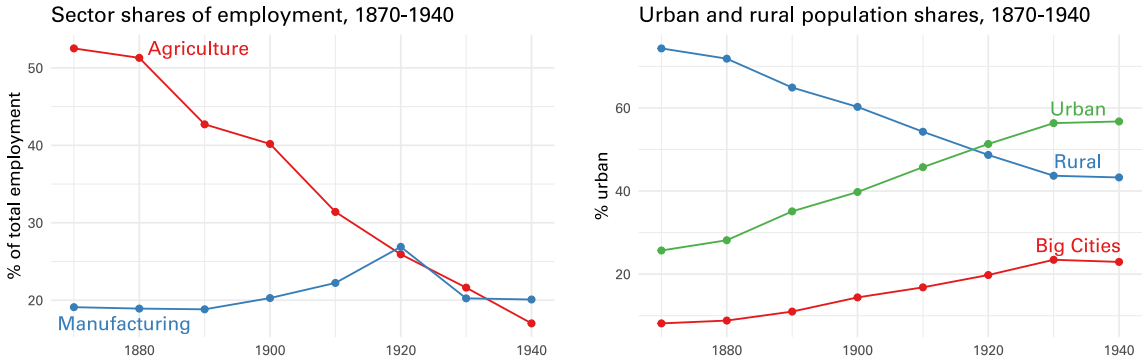

Figure 10: Shift out of agriculture and rural America. Urban areas are those with more than 2,500 residents. Big cities are those with more than 250,000 residents. Data are from Carter et al. (2006).

the grievances of Western farmers, especially with respect to the gold standard and railroad regulation (Klein, Persson and Sharp, 2023, Eichengreen et al., 2019). Bryan, the Democratic nominee, also won the Populist nomination, and Democrats won several traditionally Republican states in the West but their decline in the North and Midwest, especially due to losses in urban areas, doomed them (Burnham, 1970, Sundquist, 1983).

This pattern persisted from 1896 to 1920 (Stonecash and Silina, 2005). While the South remained solidly Democratic, the Republicans had an advantage, controlling the House and Senate for 18 of the 24 years, and the presidency for 16. The only Democratic president of this period, Woodrow Wilson, won his initial election with only 41% of the popular vote following the split in the Republican Party between supporters of the conservative Taft and the progressive Roosevelt who ran an third party campaign that arguably spoiled the election in favor of Wilson. In the decade of the 1920s the Republicans dominated, winning both houses of Congress and the presidency in all elections. Democratic presidential candidates won only 34%, 29% and 41% of the popular vote in this period.

The upper left panel of Figure 9 shows the Republican margin in the presidential popular vote and illustrates this shift from parity in the 1880s to overwhelming Republican majorities in the 1920s, punctuated only by the three-way split created by Roosevelt's candidacy in 1912. As the upper right panel shows, Republican dominance would have been even greater if they had remained united—the two most popular third-party candidates, Roosevelt in 1912 and La Follette in 1924, were Progressives who had been Republican. The lower panels show the Republican share of congressional votes and seats from the 1870s to 1930, indicating that their dominance outside the South is substantially higher after the mid 1890s than would otherwise be the case if we included a region where the disenfranchisement of such a large portion of the voting population should render our model inapplicable.

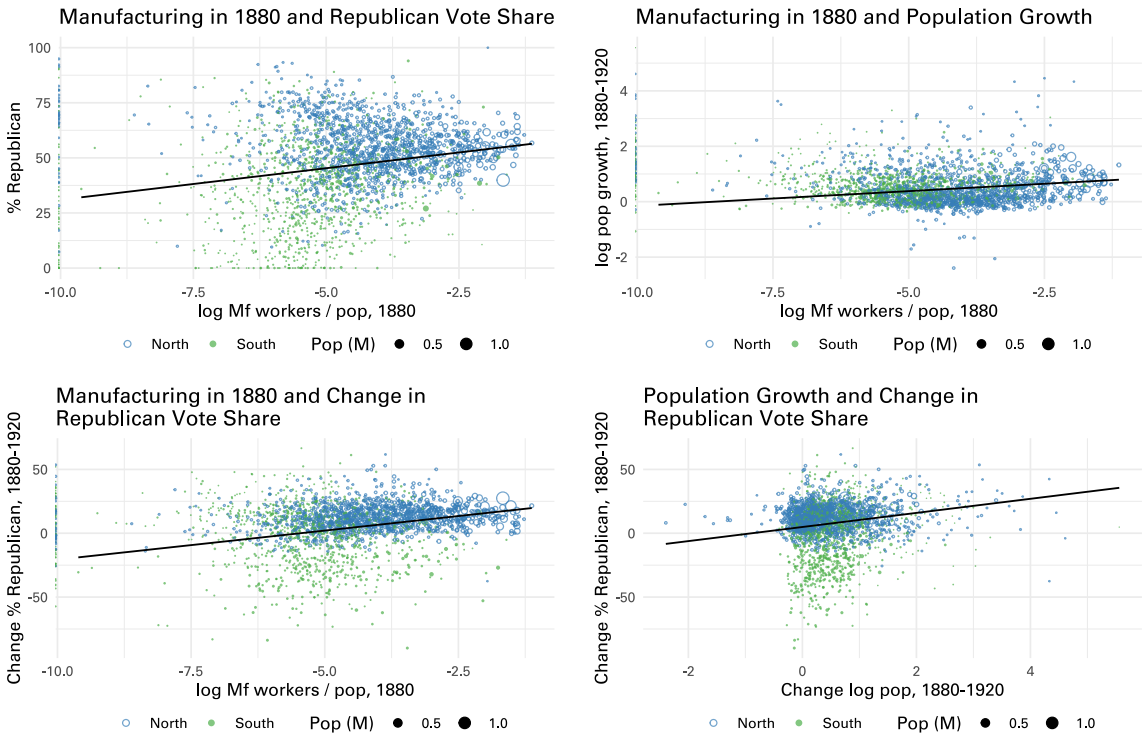

Figure 11: The top left panel shows that Republicans did better in manufacturing areas in 1880. Top right shows that manufacturing hubs experienced disproportionate population growth as the country industrialized between 1880 and 1920. The bottom left shows that between 1880 and 1920, manufacturing hubs also shifted towards the Republicans. The bottom right shows that the Republicans experienced gains in growing parts of the country. The South (in green) corresponds to counties in the former Confederacy, while the North (in blue) corresponds to counties outside the former Confederacy. In each figure the black line is from a regression using both Northern and Southern counties weighted by 1880 population. Data on manufacturing employment and population are from Haines and ICPSR (2005), while data on presidential voting are from Clubb, Flanigan and Zingale (1987).

What drove the rise of the Republicans? As in the case of the First Party System, many factors were at play but demographic changes appear to have played an important role. For one, the Democratic Party was strongest in the South but the population share of the South (former Confederacy) was in decline, translating to a smaller representation in Congress: the South held 29.5% of seats (105 seats) in the 1892 elections following reapportionment after the 1890 Census, but only 25.75% of seats (112 seats) in the 1912 elections following reapportionment after 1910 Census—a gain of only 7 seats even as the total number of House seats rose by 78 from 356 to 435 during this period.[23]

[23]No reapportionment happened immediately following the 1920 Census so we take the 1911 reapportionment as the last one that could plausibly explain Republican dominance in the 1920s.

Also important were the structural transformations in the U.S. economy, away from agriculture and towards industry, which harmed the Democrats (with their agrarian base) and aided the Republicans (with their more industrial base). As Figure 10 shows, both the agricultural workforce (left panel) and rural population (right panel) shares were declining precipitously in this period. While some of this increase occurred in big cities which had existing Democratic organizations, the bigger increase was in smaller urban areas that tended to have more Republican traditions, and often Republican machines (Banfield and Wilson, 1963, Chambers, 2000).

At the same time, non-agricultural workers were becoming more Republican. The top left panel of Figure 11 shows that in 1880 the Republicans did better than Democrats in places that were manufacturing hubs. The top right panel of the same figure shows that these places experienced higher population growth between 1880 and 1920. The bottom left panel shows that Republican support actually grew in places that were manufacturing hubs in 1880. And the bottom right shows that Republicans experienced gains in growing parts of the country, more generally. All in all, the demographic and structural changes that occurred during this period are likely to have bolstered Republican support and harmed Democratic support (Sundquist, 1983).

To estimate just how important these patterns could be in explaining the rise of Republican dominance, we conduct a simple back-of-the-envelope calculation in Appendix C. In the spirit of a Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition (Blinder, 1973, Oaxaca, 1973), we model the contribution of the following four components to Republican gains between 1880 and 1920: an increase in the level of industrialization which correlates with voting Republican, a tightening of the relationship between industrialization and voting, a combined effect of industrialization both increasing and becoming more correlated with voting, and population growth being concentrated in regions that voted Republican for reasons unrelated to industrialization. We estimate that these components together could account for nearly two thirds of the increase in the Republican share of the two party vote in presidential elections over this period. While this is only a back-of-the-envelope calculation that rests on strong modeling assumptions, it provides some indication that industrialization was an important factor in explaining Republican gains.

As with the declining Federalists, the early 20th century Democrats were aware of their electoral struggles and sought to counter the demographic and structural trends that worked against them. At the national level, Democrats were the strongest opponents of attempts to reapportion the House in favor of fast-growing states, and were able to block the constitutionally mandated redistribution of seats after the 1920 census (Napolio and Jenkins, 2023). At the local level, vote-buying and even ballot stuffing often enabled minorities to win elections, and Democratic machines in big cities (e.g. Tammany Hall in New York, or the Cook County Democratic machine in Chicago) were among the most visible practitioners of this type of manipulation (Golway, 2014, Foley, 2024, Allswang, 1977).

In the South, the Democrats succeeded in dismantling democracy altogether through their systematic campaign of vote suppression and violence against Blacks (Mickey, 2015, Aldrich and Griffin, 2019). However, despite these efforts, as in the case of the Federalists, the weight of demographic and structural changes was too great to prevent the Republicans from being politically dominant by the 1920s.

4.3 Issue Change and Transition to a New Party System

The main issues on which the two parties were polarized declined in importance during the era of Republican dominance. As we mentioned above, Reconstruction and civil rights had already started to decline in importance before the 1880s. The parties continued to debate the tariff, pensions, and currency policy, but even these issues declined in importance between the 1890s and 1930s.[24] The top panel of Figure 12 shows how all of these issues became less polarizing, and the bottom panel of the same figure shows how Congress took fewer roll call votes on all of these issues between these decades. The figure also shows how issues like taxes, welfare, public infrastructure investment, banking, union regulation, and antitrust became more polarizing and grew in importance. Both the upper and lower panels of the figure reveal a similar but noisy "downward" pattern as we saw in the corresponding graphs for the First Party System.[25]

Remarkably, the tariff, which had been one of the most polarizing issues in the 1890s and into the 1920s, became much less polarizing during the 1930s, which is also clear from the left panel of Figure 13. Aggregate tariff rates were very high by historical standards—around 50% more than antebellum rates, and three times postwar rates (Epstein and O'Halloran, 1996, p. 312). Customs revenues provided 56% of federal revenue in 1880, and a majority share of government revenue as late as 1906 (calculated form Lee and Paine, 2023). Debates on the size of the tariff were thus indirectly debates over the rate of taxation and the size of government. But after the development of newer taxes, especially the federal income tax in 1913, the fiscal importance of the tariff declined, as seen in Figure 14. By 1928, the last year before the Great Depression, tariffs made up only 14.6% of federal revenue. At the same time, as the right panel of Figure 14 shows, US exports of manufactured goods exceeded imports, correspondingly making Republican manufacturing interests less monolithic in their support for protection (Irwin, 2017).

The development of the federal income tax as a new source of government revenue was a consequence of various political pressures that led to the emergence of income redistribution as a new issue in American politics at the national level (Brownlee, 2016). New sources of

[24] Despite Republican efforts to extend eligibility, pensions became less salient as veterans finally died off: civil war pensions were 42% of federal spending in 1893 but only 3% in 1920 (Costa, 1998, pp. 184-5).

[25] Figure 12 (and the next, Figure 13) like the corresponding Figure 6 above is created by estimating issue-specific ideal points using the estimation method summarized in Appendix B.

Figure 12: Initial polarization, depolarization, and changes in issue salience during the Fourth Party System. Top figure shows the partisan difference in ideal points between the 1890-1899 and 1930-1939 periods, plotted against the partisan difference in the 1890-1899 period, by issue. We separately estimate ideal points for each issue in congresses taking office 1881-1949 and only examine issues which were voted on in both 1880-1910 and 1920-1950. We take the difference in means on each issue between the two parties for congresses taking office 1891-1899 and 1931-1939, plot the former on the horizontal axis and the difference between the two on the vertical axis. The bottom figure shows the change in the number of roll call votes on an issue, plotted against the partisan difference in the 1890-1899 period, by issue. In both plots, ideal points are scaled so that the Republican average over the total period is more positive than the Democratic average, so issues with negative differences in 1890 are ones on which the positions of the parties subsequently flipped.

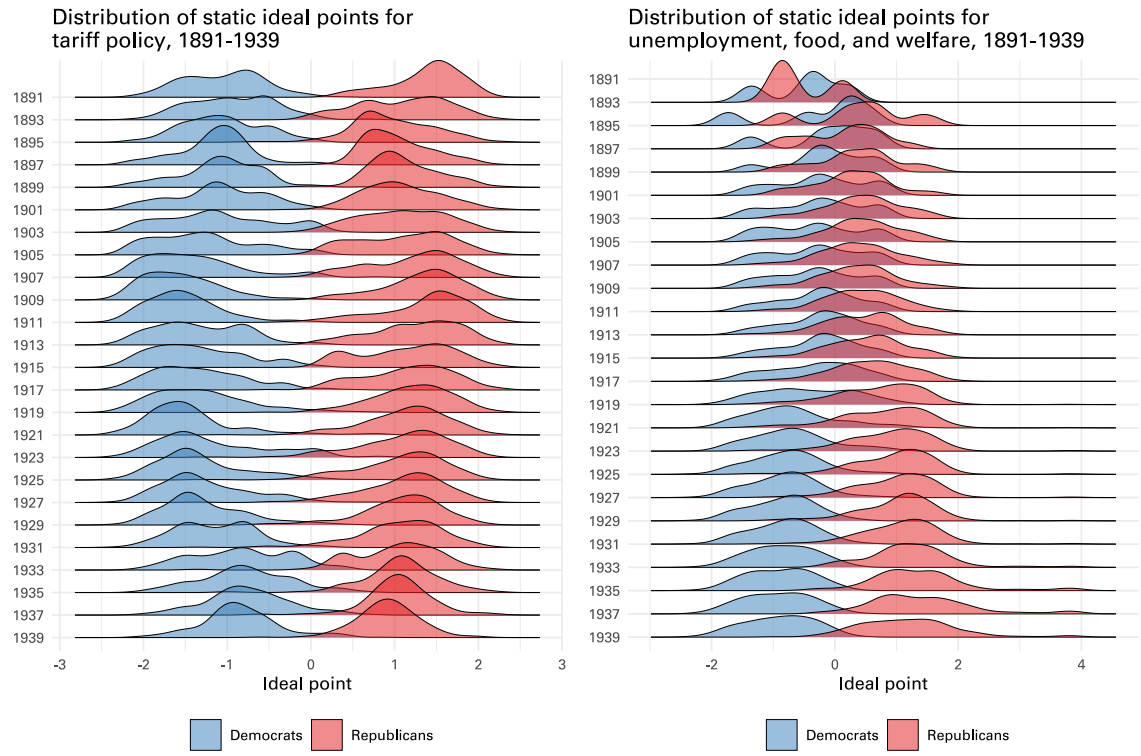

Figure 13: Convergence on old issues, divergence on new: Distribution of ideal points on the tariff, and on unemployment, food and welfare, Congresses starting 1901–1949.

revenue became essential as America became more industrialized and the federal government took on new infrastructure projects.[26] In addition, growing inequality resulted in concerns about fairness in financing these new projects, and progressive Republicans united with Democrats to support shifting the fiscal burden away from the poor to the rich through progressive taxation (Scheve and Stasavage, 2016).

At the same time, public suspicion of trusts was growing, and both corporate and union regulation emerged as salient issues that often divided the Republican coalition. Between 1900 and 1930, Congress passed a series of acts aimed to regulate businesses with significant monopoly power, by expanding the authority of the Interstate Commerce Commission.[27]

[26]For example, the Federal Aid Road Act (1916), the Federal Aid Highway Act (1921), and a series of Rivers and Harbors Appropriation Acts (1902, 1907, 1912, 1922, 1925) all provided federal government funding for various infrastructure projects across the country.

[27]Major acts pertaining to business regulation in this period are the Hepburn Act (1906), the Mann-Elkins Act (1910), and the FTC Act (1914) that created the Federal Trade Commission.

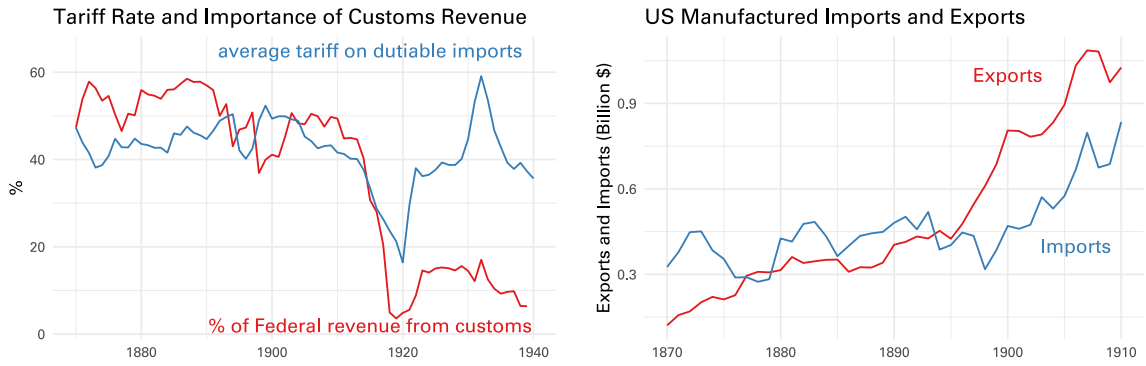

Figure 14: Left panel: High and persistent tariffs, but customs revenue declined as a share of Federal revenue. Right panel: By 1894 manufacturing exports exceeded imports. Data are from Carter et al. (2006).

It also passed a series of bills strengthening labor rights.[28] Generally, these acts had the support of Democrats and progressives within the Republican coalition, while being strongly opposed by conservative Republicans.[29]

The split between progressives and conservatives within the Republican coalition on the new issues started in the early 1900s. Under Teddy Roosevelt, progressives held the White House. Roosevelt's successor, William Howard Taft, inclined more toward the conservatives, setting up an epic fight at the 1912 convention. Denied the nomination, Roosevelt launched his own Progressive Party, which won more seats and votes than the Republican ticket. Roosevelt's party collapsed back into the Republican fold soon after the election, and by the 1920's the conservative faction took control of the Republican Party.[30] By this time, a clear division between the two parties had emerged on the new issues like welfare spending policies, as can be seen in the right panel of Figure 13. Along with the left panel, the figure shows how polarization on the new issues of unemployment, food, and welfare rose as polarization on old issues like the tariff declined. As the conservative Republicans became politically

[28]For example, the Clayton Antitrust Act (1914) included provisions to protect the rights of labor unions; the Adamson Act (1916) established an eight hour workday in the railroad industry; and La Follette's Seaman's Act (1915) mandated better treatment of merchant seamen by their employers.

[29]One early area of cooperation between Democrats and progressive Republicans was agriculture policy, where a bipartisan "Farm Bloc" sought aid to agriculture with mixed success. This group overlapped with and evolved into another bipartisan group, the "Progressive Coalition" that opposed the conservative Republican position not just on agriculture, but also took up "anti-railroad, pro-labor, anti-isolationist, anti-prohibition, pro-regulation, and pro-tariff-reform" positions (Chatfield, Jenkins and Stewart, 2021, p. 190).

[30]However, there did remain a substantial progressive group in the congressional party and statehouses led by figures such as Senators Hiram Johnson, Robert La Follette and George Norris. La Follette even won 17% of the vote in his 1924 third party presidential campaign, primarily in the West and upper Midwest.

dominant in this period, both progressive union regulation bills and anti-trust bills started failing, and the 1920s saw a wave of corporate mergers and consolidations.[31]

Cooperation with rural progressive Republicans was a natural fit for the Democrats since they had been the party of agrarian interests during the Gilded Age. The bigger electoral prize for Democrats, however, was not the declining rural population but the growing population of urban workers who would benefit from more redistributionist pro-labor economic policies. As the new issues of corporate regulation and redistribution emerged, the Democratic Party evolved from a pro-agriculture party into a pro-labor party (at least in the North and West) that supported labor rights—though some Northern Democrats broke from their party to support business interests including on trade policy (Kolko, 2008). Democrats attempted, with mixed success, to exploit the progressive-conservative division among Republicans.[32] They were often hampered by the fact that their own party, especially in the South, contained a conservative faction of its own, especially on issues pertaining to race, but also on many economic issues (Key, 1949, pp. 378-382).

The internal divisions within both the Democratic and Republican congressional parties is depicted in Figure 15 which plots legislators' ideal points on the old issues (tariffs, pensions, the gold standard, and Reconstruction) on the horizontal axis, and ideal points on the new issues (union regulation, tax rates, and antitrust) on the vertical axis. That the blue blob is wider than it is tall shows that the Democrats were more divided on the old issues than the new—the standard deviation of these ideal points for Democrats is 0.62 for Democrats on the old issues, and 0.54 on the new issues.[33] That the red blob is taller than it is wide illustrates relative Republican factionalization on the new issues. The standard deviation of ideal points for Republicans is 0.52 on the old issues and 0.58 on the new issues.[34] In addition, another notable feature of the figure is just how little the positions taken on old

[31]For example, the Industrial Relations Bill of 1922, the Sheppard-Towner Maternity Bill of 1921 and the Norris-Laguardia Bill of 1927 all failed to pass, though the latter eventually passed and was signed into law by Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. These bills all sought to improve conditions for workers by strengthening the right to organize and bargain collectively, by limiting the use of injunctions against workers, and by providing various forms of public welfare to workers.

[32]The 1912 nomination of Woodrow Wilson provides a good example of these efforts. Wilson was a well-known progressive. His 1916 reelection victory was driven by his ability to attract Western voters, many of whom backed Roosevelt in 1912. In the 1920s, eastern Democrats such as Al Smith attempted unsuccessfully to replicate his success by appealing to urban working-class voters, many of whom had voted Republican for generations or were immigrants poorly integrated into the Civil War party system. Still, by the time the conservatives took control of the Republican Party, the Democrats were eventually able to attract many disgruntled progressives into their coalition. Appendix Figure D.4 shows how areas that voted Progressive in 1912, and those with more immigrants and greater manufacturing moved toward the Democratic party by the end of the 1930s.

[33]It is also worth nothing that Democratic divisions on the old issues map onto the North-South divide. Northern Democrats—the light-blue dots—held more moderate positions than Southerners. The new issues divided North and South much less cleanly.

[34]In Figure 15 we select the set of old and new issues. Appendix Figure D.7 presents the same pattern inferring which polarizing issues were "old" and "new" from the data.

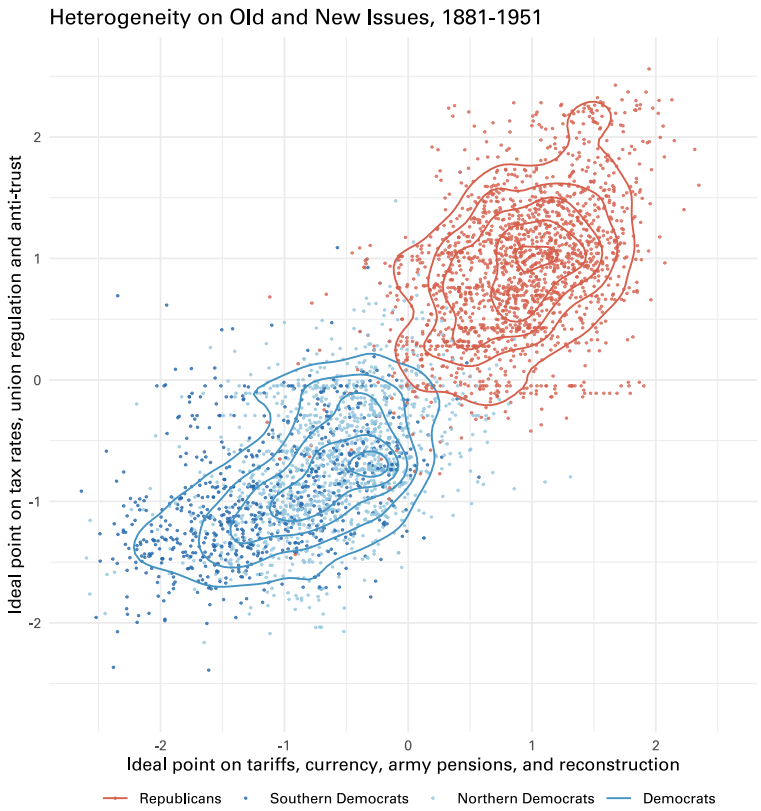

Figure 15: Democrats were more heterogeneous on the old set of issues; Republicans were more heterogeneous on the new set of issues. In this figure, each point is a legislator from the period 1881–1951. The horizontal axis is that legislator's ideal point estimated on votes relating to tariffs, currency, pensions, and Reconstruction. The vertical axis is that legislator's ideal point estimated on votes relating to tax rates, union regulation, and antitrust. The solid lines are density contours for the two parties. We show Southern Democrats in dark blue and Northern Democrats in light blue.

and new issues map on to each other: for every position on the horizontal axis, there is a wide range of positions taken on the vertical axis, and vice versa.

The realignment of American politics that is suggested by Figure 15 took off after the Great Depression (Burnham, 1970, Caughey, Dougal and Schickler, 2020). The Depression made economic policy much more salient than it had been during the boom of the 1920s. The Republicans proposed their traditional solution to economic problems (a higher tariff), but this only served to unite the Democrats and alienate some progressives. The 1932 election result was a landslide for the Democrats that swept aside traditional regional divisions, with their nominee Franklyn Roosevelt becoming the first Democrat since the 1850s to win a majority of northern electoral votes—a result he was able to replicate in his subsequent

reelection victories. The Roosevelt administration solidified their victory by enacting an ambitious set of regulatory, public spending and welfare policies—the New Deal.

5 Conclusion

At the start of this paper, we asked what previous instances of depolarization in American history could teach us about how our current period of polarization will end. Our analysis shows that polarization tends to go hand in hand with electoral parity between the parties, and when it ends it ends with the emergence of one-party dominance, driven in part by demographic and structural economic changes. The declining party tries to slow or stop these trends that work against it, often resorting to anti-democratic or at least anti-majoritarian practices—for example, by engaging in vote suppression or electoral fraud, or by advocating for supermajority requirements in Congress.

Even today polarization can be linked with electoral parity between the parties. In the last 24 years, each party has won three presidential elections, all decided by close margins by 20th century standards. In the same period, the Democrats have won the Senate seven times out of twelve, and the House four out of twelve. With one exception (2009–11), no party has held more than 55 senate seats, or more than 56.7% of House seats. And no party has had unified control of government for more than four years. Not unreasonably, the elites of both parties are unlikely to conclude that competing on the current issues will exclude them from power, even if they take extreme positions.

The main lesson of our analysis for contemporary polarization, therefore, is that polarization will continue so long as the parties remain electorally competitive, and that if it is to end, then demographic and structural changes like those that took place at the end of the First and Fourth party systems could play an important role. At the same time, anti-democratic practices, such as partisan gerrymandering, which both parties engage in today, are likely to continue if one of the parties were to emerge as dominant.

That said, there are many reasons why the patterns of depolarization that we see in the historical cases may be of limited relevance today. One important difference is that past periods of polarization took place under a different set of institutions to the ones that are in place today—for example, the use of primaries to nominate general election candidates which initiated in the late 19th century but accelerated during the 20th century. It has been argued that the primaries system itself contributes to polarization (e.g. Burden, 2001), though the empirical findings on this are mixed (Hirano et al., 2010, Kujala, 2020, Hill, 2015, Brady, Han and Pope, 2007). But another relevant effect of primaries could be that they help parties adapt to the changing preferences of voters in their coalition, preventing any one party from becoming dominant quickly and making it unlikely that the declining party would simply disappear, as the Federalists did, rather than gradually adapt to changing demographics and economic structure. In comparing the First and Fourth party systems, the declining

Democrats were able to better adapt than the declining Federalists were, which may have contributed to the prolonging of both polarization and depolarization in the later case. If anything, the system of primaries may have made today's parties even more agile than the early 20th century Democrats were, preventing any one party from becoming dominant, and resulting in a more gradual change in issues.

A third important difference between the historical cases and our current period is that in the past it was not just partisan divisions that followed regional cleavages, but the salience of the major issues also varied by geography. Even during the Progressive Era when Democrats and Republicans were divided, Northern Democrats often broke with their party to support the interests of Northerners in industry and manufacturing alongside Northern Republicans. With the nationalization of American politics (e.g. Hopkins, 2018, Grumbach, 2022, Moskowitz, 2021) such regional divisions today exist to a much lesser degree. For this reason it is not clear how our understanding of past episodes of depolarization would apply today were depolarization to happen.

Finally, we end with two important theoretical questions that our model leaves unaddressed. First, the model explains party system changes that result from polarization cycles but not changes that are driven by other forces. Therefore, it leaves open the important question of what drives party system change in contexts where depolarization did not occur, such as the transition from the Second to the Third Party System.

Second, our model does not explain how the switch to a new party system could arise with parties actively choosing to emphasize new issues, or parties responding strategically to underlying changes in the salience of new issues relative to the old issues. Making issue salience a strategic choice by the parties is another important avenue for future research on depolarization and party system change.

Appendix

A Proofs

A.1 Proof of Proposition 1

To construct a party system equilibrium with active issue i in all districts, note that α_i^d is a maximizer of U_A^d subject to $\alpha_i^d \in [0,1]$ as required by the Nash condition in the definition of a party system equilibrium, iff

$$\alpha_i^d \in \arg\max_{\tilde{\alpha}_i^d \in [0,1]} -(\hat{\alpha}_i - \tilde{\alpha}_i^d)^2 + w\varphi(2\lambda_i - 1)\tilde{\alpha}_i^d$$

for each α_i^d in this profile, independently of all $(\beta_i^d)_d$. Since these problems are the same for all d and there are a continuum of districts, we must have $\alpha_i^d = \alpha_i^{d'}$ for all d, d'. The same holds for party B.

Next, note that the derivative of the candidates' objective functions with respect to their choice variables in all districts d are

$$2(\hat{\alpha}_i - \alpha_i^d) + w\varphi(2\lambda_i - 1)$$
$$2(\hat{\beta}_i - \beta_i^d) + w\varphi(2\lambda_i - 1)$$

Since the objective functions are negative quadratic in their respective choice variables, these derivatives must both equal zero at an interior solution; otherwise, we have corner solutions. For the minimal party differentiation condition to be satisfied we require either $\alpha_i < \frac{1}{2} \leq \beta_i$, in which case $\hat{\alpha}_i = 0$ and $\hat{\beta}_i = 1$, or $\beta_i < \frac{1}{2} \leq \alpha_i$, in which case $\hat{\alpha}_i = 1$ and $\hat{\beta}_i = 0$, for if neither of these hold then $\hat{\alpha}_i = \hat{\beta}_i$ implying that $\alpha_i^d = \beta_i^d$ for all d, which contradicts the condition. Substituting these different values of $\hat{\alpha}_i$ and $\hat{\beta}_i$ into the first order conditions in turn implies that if $\alpha_i < \frac{1}{2} \leq \beta_i$ then $\alpha_i^d = l_i$ and $\beta_i^d = r_i$ for all d satisfy the Nash condition, while if $\beta_i < \frac{1}{2} \leq \alpha_i$ then $\alpha_i^d = l_i$ and $\beta_i^d = r_i$ for all d satisfy the Nash condition.

Finally, note that at these solutions, we can have either $\alpha_i < \frac{1}{2} \leq \beta_i$ or $\beta_i < \frac{1}{2} \leq \alpha_i$, and thus the constructed tuple $(i, \{\alpha_i^d, \beta_i^d\}_d)$ satisfies all of the requirements of a party system equilibrium with active issue i iff $\underline{\lambda} \leq \lambda_i < \overline{\lambda}$.

A.2 Proof of Proposition 2

Consider an equilibrium with $\alpha_i < \frac{1}{2} \leq \beta_i$. If $\lambda_i \geq \frac{1}{2}$ then $\alpha_i = w\varphi(\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2})$ and $\beta_i = 1$, so $\Delta = 1 - w\varphi(\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2})$ and $M = \varphi(2\lambda_i - 1)[1 - w\varphi(\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2})]$. If $\lambda < \frac{1}{2}$ then $\alpha_i = 0$ and $\beta_i = 1 - w\varphi(\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_i)$, so $\Delta = 1 - w\varphi(\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_i)$ and $M = \varphi(1 - 2\lambda_i)[1 - w\varphi(\frac{1}{2} - \lambda_i)]$. Similar calculations hold in the case of $\alpha_i < \frac{1}{2} \leq \beta_i$ with the α_i and β_i values swapped. Clearly Δ is decreasing with $|\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2}|$. To show that M is increasing with it for $\lambda_i \in [\underline{\lambda}, \overline{\lambda})$, let $\Lambda = |\lambda_i - \frac{1}{2}|$

and write $M = 2\varphi\Lambda(1 - w\varphi\Lambda)$. Since M is quadratic in Λ with peak at $\Lambda = \frac{1}{2w\varphi}$ it is increasing in Λ provided $\Lambda \leq \frac{1}{2w\varphi}$. This inequality defines the range $\underline{\lambda} \leq \lambda_i \leq \overline{\lambda}$.

B Issue-Specific Ideal Point Estimation

To create Figures 6, 12, and 13, 15 and Appendix Figure D.7 we estimate issue-specific ideal points using the algorithm developed by Imai, Lo and Olmsted (2016), which applies the Expectation Maximization algorithm to the static ideal-point model proposed by Clinton, Jackman and Rivers (2004). Following Clinton, Jackman and Rivers (2004), we use as starting values the first eigenvector of the correlation matrix of the double-centered roll-call matrix. We use the classifications of bills to issues from Poole and Rosenthal (1991).

To create Figures 6 and 12, for example, when we estimate ideal points for the First Party System, we use rollcalls on issues for which there was at least one vote in the period 1821–1829 and at least one in the period 1801–1809; and for the Third/Fourth Party System, at least one vote in the period 1880-1910 and at least one in the period 1920-1950. We separately estimate ideal points for rollcalls on each of these issues over the period 1789–1837 for the First Party System, and over the period 1881–1949 for the Third/Fouth Party System. We then plot the resulting ideal points for the periods 1801-1809 and 1821-1829 (First Party System) and 1891-1899 and 1931-1939 (Third/Fourth Party Systems).

C Oaxaca Blinder Decomposition

We now detail the back of the envelope calculation mentioned in Section 4.2 of the main text, which is based on a Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition. Let us posit the following relationship between industrialization and voting for the Republicans:

$$y_{it} = \alpha_t + \beta_t x_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{A-1}$$

where y_{it} is the share of the two-party vote won by the Republicans in county i at time t, and x_{it} is industrialization—log manufacturing workers per capita. β_t captures the year-specific effect of industrialization—and all things correlated with industrialization—on voting, α_t year-specific factors that influence support for the Republicans everywhere, and ε_{it} place-specific support for the Republicans attributable to factors orthogonal to industrialization. Writing $\gamma_{it} := \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it}$ we can separate this expression into the component due to industrialization and the component due to factors orthogonal to industrialization:

$$y_{it} = \underbrace{\beta_t x_{it}}_{\text{Industrialization}} + \underbrace{\gamma_{it}}_{\text{Other factors}}$$

The share of the national vote won by the Republicans is then

$$\bar{y}_t := \sum_i w_{it} \left(\beta x_{it} + \gamma_{it} \right)$$

where w_{it} is the share of the electorate in county i at time t, so $\sum_i w_{it} = 1$. We can then write

$$\bar{y}_t = \beta_t \bar{x}_t + \sum_i w_{it} \gamma_{it}$$

where $\bar{x}_t$ is the weighted average of x_{it}. We are interested in the change in support for the Republicans between $t = 1880$ and $t = 1920$. We can write

$$\bar{y}_{\prime 20} - \bar{y}_{\prime 80} = \beta_{20} \bar{x}_{\prime 20} - \beta_{\prime 80} \bar{x}_{\prime 80} + \sum_i w_{i,\prime 20} \gamma_{i,\prime 20} - \sum_i w_{i,\prime 80} \gamma_{i,\prime 80}$$

Adding and subtracting terms we can write this change in terms of five components:

$$\begin{aligned} \bar{y}_{\prime 20} - \bar{y}_{\prime 80} = & \underbrace{\beta_{\prime 80} \left(\bar{x}_{\prime 20} - \bar{x}_{\prime 80} \right)}_{\text{Industrialization}} + \underbrace{\left(\beta_{\prime 20} - \beta_{\prime 80} \right) \bar{x}_{\prime 80}}_{\text{Slope change}} + \underbrace{\left(\beta_{\prime 20} - \beta_{\prime 80} \right) \left(\bar{x}_{\prime 20} - \bar{x}_{\prime 80} \right)}_{\text{Joint effect}} + \\ & \underbrace{\sum_i \left(w_{i,\prime 20} - w_{i,\prime 80} \right) \gamma_{i,\prime 80}}_{\text{Population growth}} + \underbrace{\sum_i w_{i,\prime 20} \left(\gamma_{i,\prime 20} - \gamma_{i,\prime 80} \right)}_{\text{Unmodeled change}} \end{aligned} \quad \text{(A-2)}$$

The first component, labelled "industrialization," captures the contribution from the level of industrialization increasing across regions. The second, "Slope change," captures the contribution from the relationship between industrialization and voting becoming tighter over this period. The third, "Joint effect," is an additional multiplicative component due to changes in both industrialization and the relationship between industrialization and voting. The fourth, "Population growth," represents areas that had supported the Republicans for reasons unrelated to industrialization experiencing rapid population growth and making up a growing share of the national total. The fifth, "Unmodeled change," captures residual increases in support not attributable to industrialization or population change.

To estimate these different components, we subset to the 2,294 counties for which we have data on presidential voting and manufacturing in both 1880 and 1920. For the purposes of this exercise, we define manufacturing activity in county i at time t as

$$x_{it} = k_{it} + \log \left(\frac{1 + \text{manufacturing workers}_{it}}{\text{population}_{it}} \right),$$

where k_{it} is a constant added equivalent to the minimum value of log manufacturing workers per capita in either year. We add this constant so that in a regression with x_{it} as the

Component	Estimate	Confidence Interval	% of total
Industrialization	1.49	[1.29, 1.69]	10.95
Slope change	6.21	[0.79, 11.5]	45.55
Joint effect	0.60	[0.08, 1.17]	4.43
Population growth	0.57	[-1.45, 1.38]	4.21
Unmodeled change	4.75	[1.2, 12.69]	34.85
Total change	13.62	[12.29, 14.98]	100.00

Table C.1: Components of 1880–1920 increase in Republican support. The reports the contributions of different forms of industrialization and population growth to the change (in percentage points) in support for the Republican Party between 1880 and 1920. The third column provides a bootstrapped percentile 95% confidence interval for each estimate, the fourth reports each estimate as a percentage of the total change.

independent variable, the intercept corresponds to the fitted value at the lowest level of manufacturing activity over this period. This variable is similar to the variable used in Figure 11, with the exceptions of the addition of 1 to the numerator to deal with zero values. We define w_{it} as the number of votes for the two parties in county i in year t, divided by the total number of votes for the two parties in all counties in our sample in that year. We estimate the β_t and γ_{it} parameters by weighted least squares following equation (A-1), weighting by the two-party vote w_{it}. We use these estimates to calculate the five components according to equation (A-2). We calculate confidence intervals using the bootstrap, clustering by county.

Table C.1 reports the estimated values of these components. In our sample of counties, the Republican share of the two party vote increased 13.6 percentage points, from a narrow majority of 50.2% in 1880, to a landslide 63.8% in 1920. Changes related to the growth of industry and its strengthening relationship with voting behavior account for 8.3 percentage points, 61% of this increase. The rising level of industrialization alone accounts for 11% of the total increase, and the strengthening relationship between industrialization and voting is the largest single component, accounting for 46% of the total increase. On top of the effects of industrialization, population growth in areas that had voted Republican for reasons orthogonal to industrialization contributes another 0.6 percentage points (4% of the change), though the confidence interval for this component includes zero.

D Additional Figures

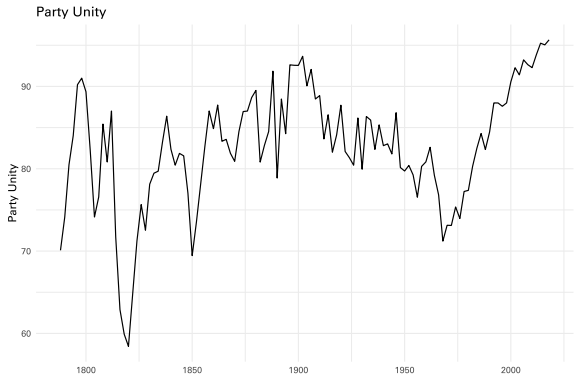

Figure D.1: Party Unity Over Time. The figure shows party unity over time. This is the total percentage of roll call votes that members of each party vote with the majority of members of their party. The three times that this polarization measure exceeds a threshold of 90% are during the First Party System, the Fourth Party System, and the contemporary party system.

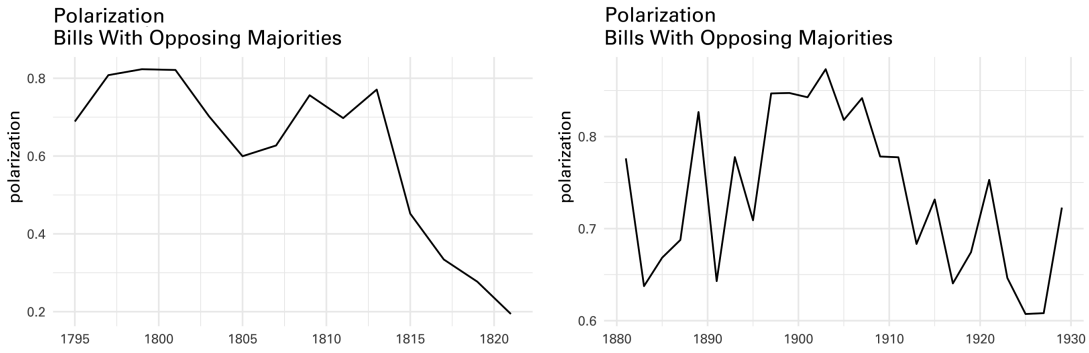

Figure D.2: Share of bills on which the majorities of the two parties (Federalists andDemocratic-Republicans on the left, and Democrats and Republicans on the right) voted in opposition to one another in the House.

Figure D.3: County-level correlates of the share of the two-party vote won by the Whigs in congressional elections in the 1840s. In the top-left panel, the x axis is the share of the two-party (Federalist/Republican) vote won by the Federalists in congressional elections in the 1800s. In the top right, log manufacturing employment divided by total employment in 1840, in the bottom left the change in log population 1820–1840, and in the bottom right, log commerce employment divided by total employed in 1840.

Figure D.4: County-level correlates of the change in the share of the two-party vote won by the Democrats between 1920 and 1940. In the top-left panel, the x axis is the share of the 1912 presidential vote won by the Progressives, in the top-right panel, manufacturing workers per capita in 1920, in the bottom-left panel, the foreign-born population share in 1920, and in the bottom-right panel, the Black population share in 1920.

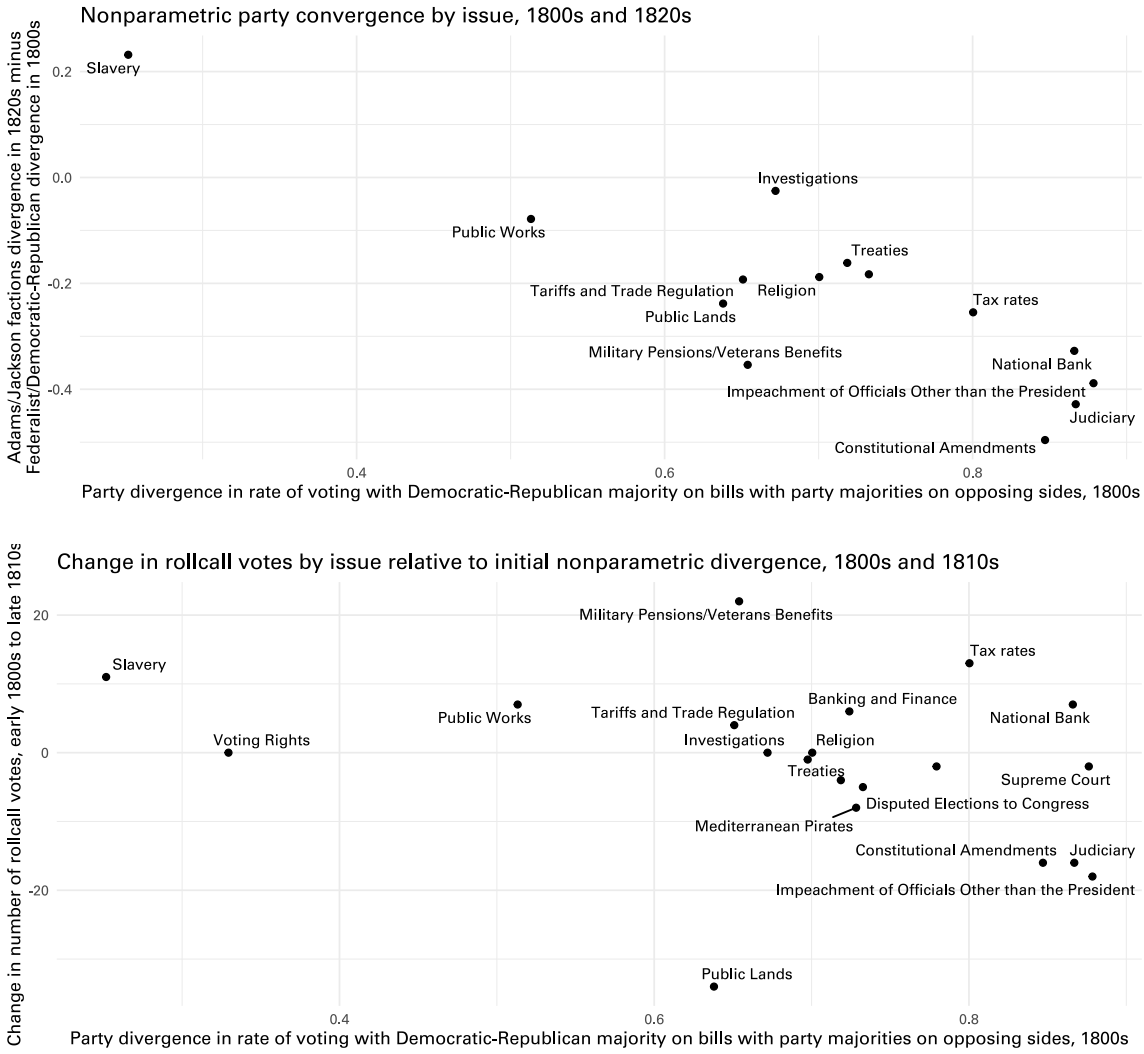

Figure D.5: Initial polarization, depolarization, and changes in issue salience, First Party System, using a nonparametric measure of polarization to supplement Figure 6 in the main text. The top figure plots the partisan difference between the Adams and Jackson factions in the 1820s, by issue, minus the Federalist/Democratic-Republican partisan difference in the 1800s, against the Federalist/Democratic-Republican partisan difference. We measure this divergence as the difference in rates of voting with the dominant party on votes on which the majorities of the two parties took opposing sides. The bottom figure shows the change in the number of roll call votes between the 1801-1805 and 1815-1819 periods (as in Figure 6), plotted against divergence between the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in the 1801-1809 period.

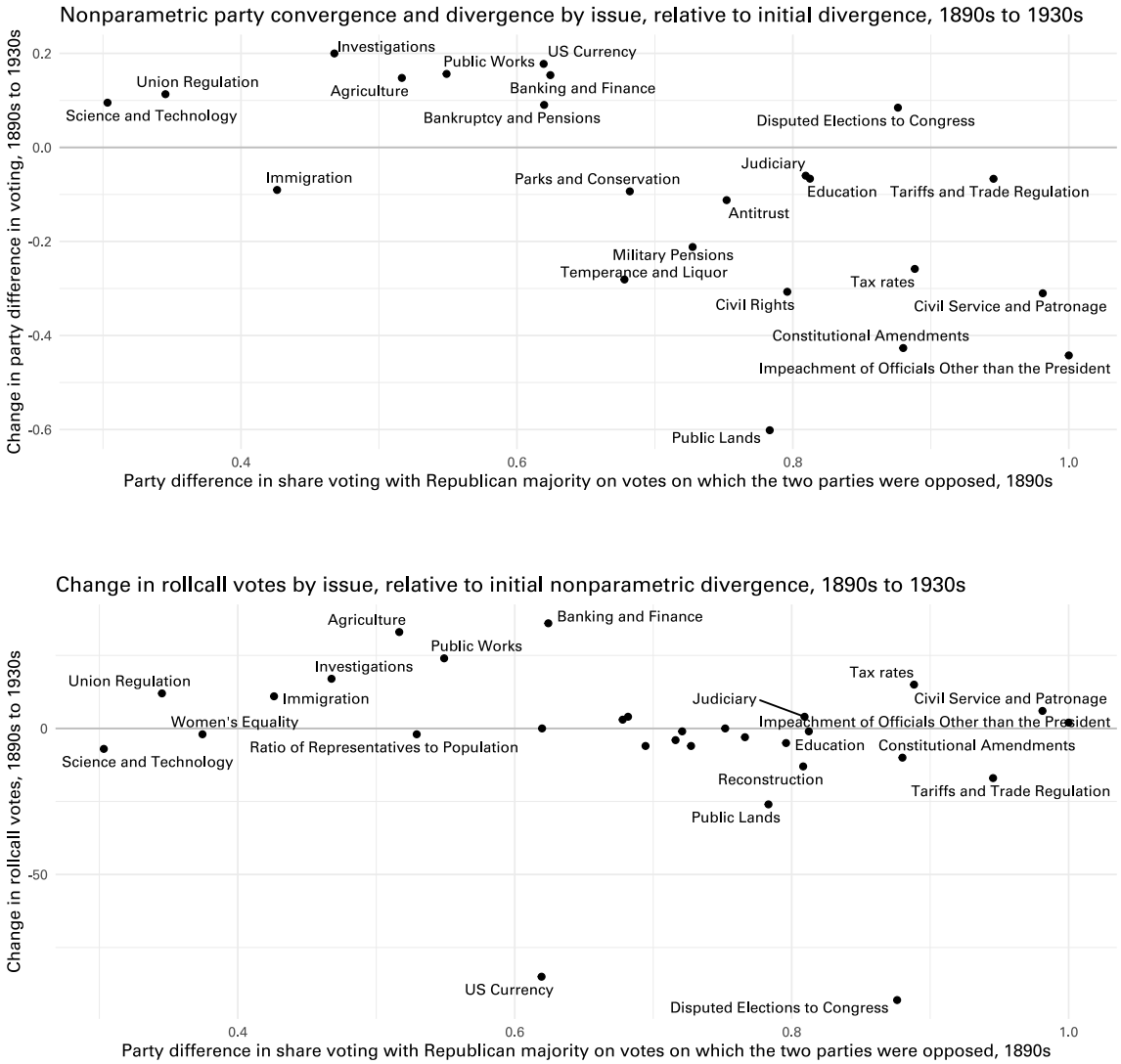

Figure D.6: Initial polarization, depolarization, and changes in issue salience, Fourth Party System, using a nonparametric measure of polarization to supplement Figure 12 in the main text. As in the previous figure, polarization is measured as the difference in rates of voting with the dominant party (here Republicans) on votes on which the majorities of the two parties took opposing sides. The top figure plots the change in partisan divergence between the 1890s and 1930s against divergence in the 1890s, the bottom the change in the number of roll call votes between the 1890s and 1930s against divergence in the 1890s.

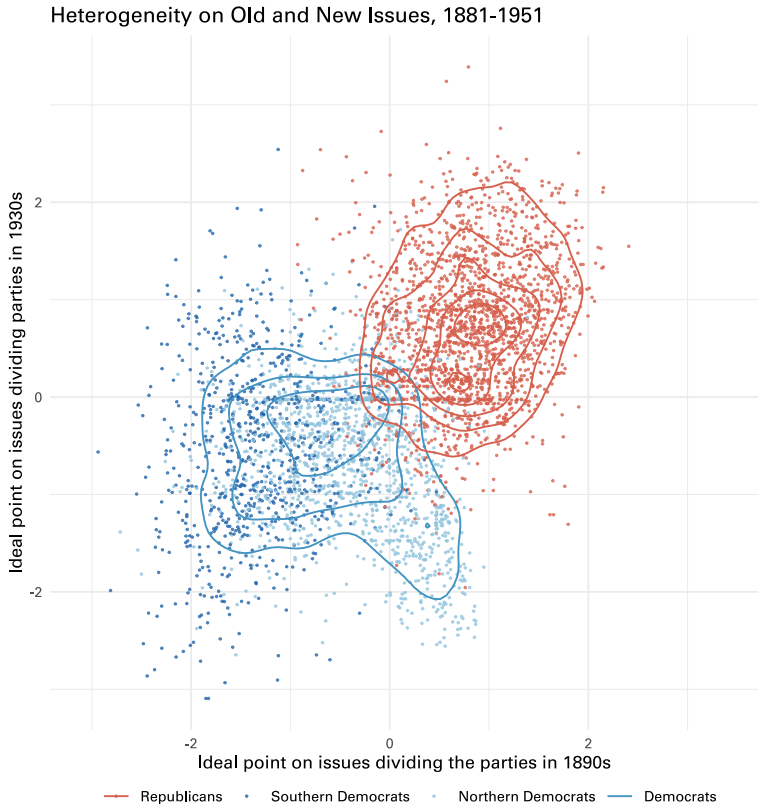

Figure D.7: Democrats were more heterogeneous on the issues dividing the parties in the 1890s, Republicans were more heterogeneous on the issues dividing the parties in the 1930s. This figure reproduces Figure 15, using our estimates of polarization by issue to select which issues are "old" and "new." The x axis is a legislator's ideal point estimated for issues on which the party means differed by at least a standard deviation in the 1890s, as in the x axis of Figure 12, the y axis is that legislator's ideal point estimated for issues on which the party means differed by the same amount in the 1930s. We exclude issues dividing the parties in both periods. The solid lines are density contours for the two parties; we show Southern Democrats in dark blue and Northern Democrats in light blue. The greater width than height of the blue blob indicates that Democrats were more divided on the old set of issues. The relatively greater height of the red blob indicates that Republicans were more divided on the new issues. The old issues used for the x axis ideal points are Bankruptcy and Pensions, Public Lands, Shipping, Reconstruction, Immigration, Workplace Conditions, Public Safety, Women's Equality, Public Health, Civil Rights, and Welfare. The new issues used for the y axis ideal points are Union Regulation, Parks and Conservation, Congressional Pay, Children, Tobacco, and Education. The standard deviations of ideal points for the old issues are 0.76 for the Democrats and 0.54 for the Republicans. On the new issues they are 0.79 for the Democrats and 0.72 for the Republicans.

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