

The Disappearing Political Center: Congress and the Incredible Shrinking Middle

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# THE DISAPPEARING POLITICAL CENTER

## CONGRESS AND THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MIDDLE

SARAH A. BINDER

So far one of the big stories of the 1996 congressional elections is not who is running, but who is quitting. Thirteen Senators and 33 representatives have decided to step down voluntarily from their jobs. Most notably, these retirements are speeding along the thinning of the political center—the “incredible shrinking middle,” as one senator calls it.

Within the Republican party, the moderate wing occupies the political center—that is, it is closer ideologically to the midpoint between the two parties than to its own party’s ideological center. And retirements threaten to eliminate Republican moderates from Capitol Hill, with Senators Bill Cohen, Nancy Kassebaum, and Mark Hatfield deciding not to run again—following in the footsteps of fellow moderates John Danforth and David Durenberger, who reached the same conclusion before the 1994 election. Among Democrats the party’s conservative wing is closest to the political center. And it too is being depleted, with the likes of Senators Howell Heflin and Bennett Johnston and Representative Sonny Montgomery deciding to call it quits.

The result, many worry, is an unprecedented disappearance of the political center. In a political system that demands compromise and accommodation to bring about change, the center is considered vital to the moderate, bipartisan public policymaking generally preferred by the American public. Absent a political center, increased partisanship and ideological polarization are inevitable—and sure to feed public distrust of and distaste for politicians and the political process.

### Whither the Center?

The political center in Congress has shrunk markedly over the past 15 years (figure 1). Hovering around 30 percent of House and Senate members in the 1960s and 1970s, the percentage of centrists in each chamber began slipping in the 1980s, and it has fallen to about 10 percent today. Centrists now can claim 11.3 percent of the House, down from 20 percent or more during the 1980s. And after peaking at 32.3 percent of the Senate during 1969–70, the first term of the Nixon administration, centrists make up less than 10 percent of today’s Senate.

The broadly similar declines in both chambers conceal several notable differences between the House and Senate and their two parties (table 1). In the House, both conservative Democrats and moderate Republicans have seen their ranks gradually thin since the early 1970s. But the conservative Democratic faction has consistently been larger than the moderate wing of the Republican conference since the late 1950s. Today conservative Democrats in the House still outnumber moderate Republicans three to one.

In the Senate, centrists of both parties actually increased sporadically from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s before starting to decline during the late 1970s. But the most striking development in the Senate has been the depletion of conservative Democrats, whose numbers made up nearly a quarter of Senate Democrats during the late 1980s but in recent years claim only a handful.

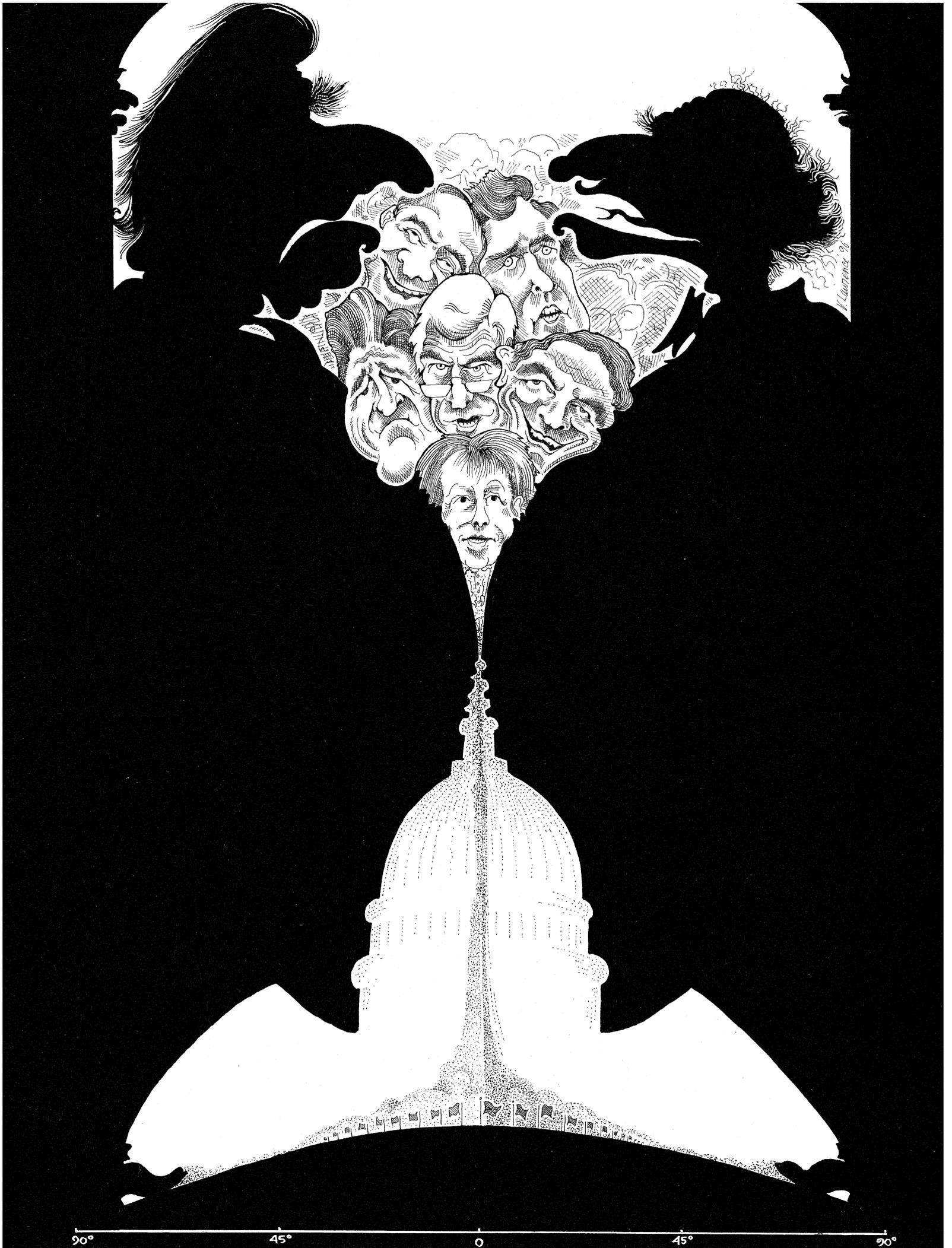
### Are Retirements to Blame?

The conventional wisdom is that voluntary retirements are newly driving the demise of the middle as House and Senate centrists find themselves too out of step with their parties to seek reelection.

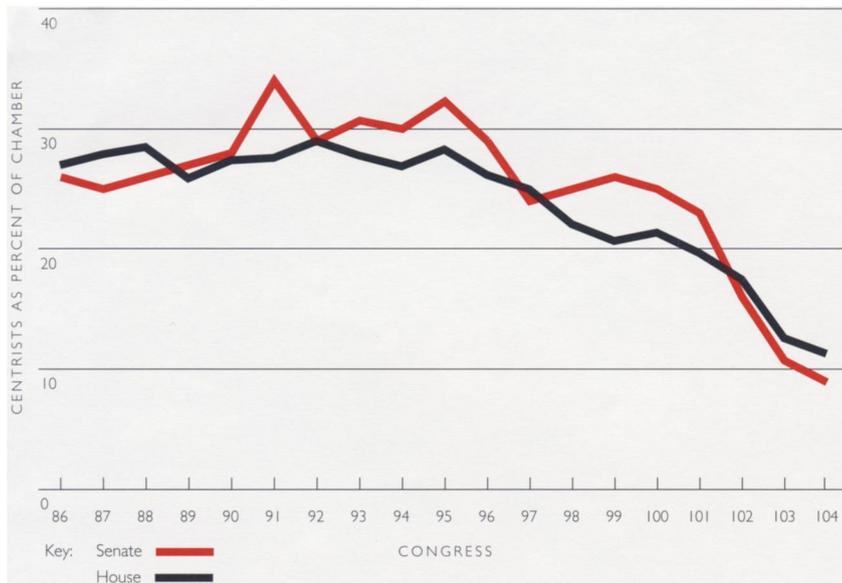
As it turns out, the retirement of conservative Democrats in the House is nothing new. Conservative Democrats consistently made up the lion’s share of their party’s House retirements in every election save two between 1968 and 1978. But though conservative Democrats retired at very high rates during the 1970s, their contingent shrank only incrementally, suggesting that retiring conservative Democrats tended to be replaced by like-minded lawmakers. What *is* new is that Democratic conservatives who are once again showing an increased tendency to retire—particularly in the 1994 election and in the upcoming fall elections—are no longer being replaced by their own kind. Southern voters instead are electing conservative Republicans. The overall size of the Democrats’ right-leaning wing is steadily shrinking.

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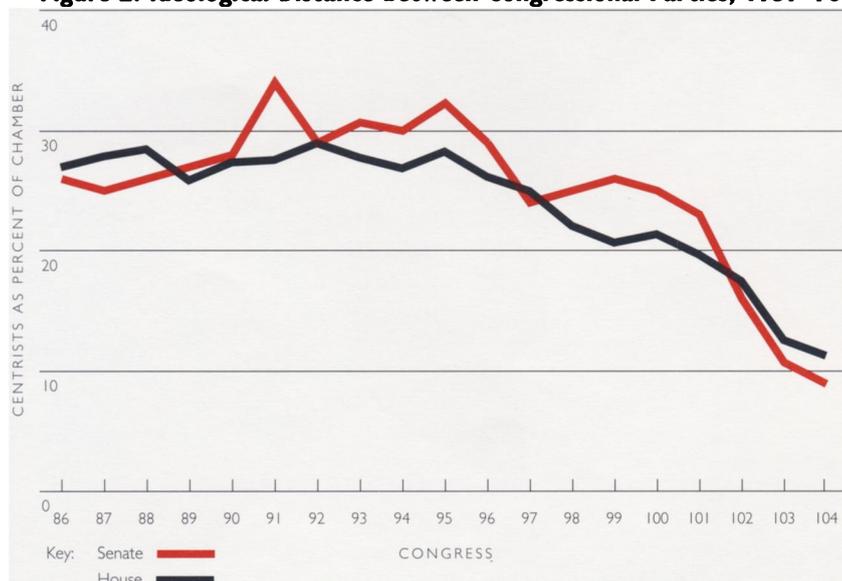


**Figure 1. Size of the Political Center, 1959–96**



Note: "Centrists" are defined as those members or senators whose ideological positions on a liberal-conservative dimension place them closer to the ideological mid-point between the two parties than to the median member of their own party. Ideological scores are drawn from first dimension coordinates of D-NOMINATE and W-NOMINATE scores calculated by Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal from congressional roll call data. NOMINATE scores for the 104th Congress (1995–96) are based on the roll call votes through December 1995. See Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "Patterns of Congressional Voting," *American Journal of Political Science*, February 1991.

**Figure 2. Ideological Distance between Congressional Parties, 1959–96**



Note: Ideological distance is the absolute difference between the median Democrat and median Republican in each chamber, based on Poole and Rosenthal's NOMINATE scores (see notes to figure 1).

Out of step with their more liberal colleagues, often unable to swallow the policy prescriptions of the new Republican majority, and facing voters who now prefer conservative Republicans to themselves, House Democratic conservatives (save those who jumped ship and switched to the Republican party) have little incentive to stay in the House. Observed retiring Pete Peterson (D-FL), "I have worked as a bridge-builder to find bipartisan solutions to our nation's problems. Unfortunately, the current political climate has rendered this approach ineffective."

Unlike their Democratic colleagues, moderate House Republicans have shown little distinctive inclination to retire, either now or in the past. Only in 1976 did moderates stand out in the roster of retiring Republicans. The steady decline of moderate Republicans since the early 1970s suggests that electoral defeat and replacement by more conservative Republicans, not retirement, has been at work. Although moderate Republicans make up less than 10 percent of the House Republican conference, they are not showing their discouragement by retiring. In fact, they have had some limited success in this year's congressional battles—helping to moderate the impulses of their conservative colleagues on issues ranging from protecting the environment to raising the minimum wage. The Republicans' slim majority in the House clearly enhances the leverage of their small moderate wing. In times past, recalled moderate Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) early this year, Republican moderates got "more attention and consideration from the Democratic majority side than they did from the leadership of the Republican majority. That has changed."

In the Senate, most retirements among centrists are by Republicans, not Democrats. In fact the thinning of conservative Democratic ranks does not appear to have been driven by voluntary retirements. Although many conservative Democrats retired in 1968, 1974, and 1988, their numbers remained steady or actually increased slightly after each of those elections. The abrupt drop in the number of conservative Senate Democrats in recent years appears to be, again, more the result of the emergence of a conservative Republican electorate in the South than of voluntary retirements. To be sure, over time these two forces are likely to complement each other: as conservative Democrats are replaced by Republicans or in some cases by liberal Democrats, the more isolated their remaining political soulmates likely feel and the more likely they are to retire.

Among Senate Republicans, the retirement of moderates has only lately begun taking its toll on the dwindling center. Although the percentage of Republican moderates in the Senate has declined steadily since the 1970s, moderates did not dominate retirements until in the current electoral cycle—with 60 percent of retiring Republicans clearly from the left flank of their party. The gradual rightward shift of Senate Republicans in the past, it seems, has primarily been driven by election results, not voluntary retirements. This year is an important exception, as Republican moderates are calling it quits before testing the electoral waters. Seeing their numbers shrunk by elec-

toral forces in recent years and finding themselves increasingly isolated by their more conservative and homogeneous Republican colleagues, moderate Republicans are strongly inclined to give up their Senate seats. Democratic Senator John Breaux of Louisiana described their predicament best, noting recently that when a Senate moderate such as John Chafee “turns around and doesn’t see a Durenberger, a Danforth, he can’t be as effective.” Those in the middle, Breaux noted, “have to have someone to meet with. You can’t meet with yourself in a phone booth.”

### A Congress without a Political Center

The shrinking political center has left Congress increasingly polarized (figure 2). Democrats are perched on the left, Republicans on the right, in both the House and the Senate as the ideological centers of the two parties have moved markedly apart. The change since the late 1980s is most extreme for the Senate, but striking for both chambers. From the late 1950s until well into the 1980s, the ideological distance between the center of the two parties remained relatively stable, even as the parties became more homogeneous. Since the 1980s the distance between the two parties has essentially doubled.

Some observers might see the parties’ movement toward ideological extremes as a benign, if not positive, development. Advocates of stronger political parties, for example, have bemoaned a political system that encourages the two major parties to drift toward the center. A disappearing center reflects to some extent the emergence of more cohesive and homogeneous legislative parties. And as the distance between the two parties grows, their philosophical differences on such matters as the appropriate role and reach of the federal government become more pronounced, giving voters a real choice between political agendas.

But the movement away from the center has been accompanied by a coarsening of politics and bitter partisanship—leaving voters increasingly disenchanted with Washington politics. Political discord has played itself out in part in an apparent decline in congressional comity. Senator Robert Byrd noted scathingly last year, “There have been giants in this Senate, and I have seen some of them. Little did I know when I came here that I would live to see pygmies.”

The polarized environment has also made it hard for members of both parties to meet in the center to forge compromise. As former majority leader Bob Dole lamented in retiring from the Senate, “None of us has a perfect solution. But there’s got to be some solution of where we can come together, Republicans and Democrats.” The further apart the two parties, the tougher it is to negotiate compromise, partly because fewer members are positioned in the center and partly because there is little incentive for others to reach into the middle. In the Senate, for example, Republicans this year adopted a new party rule that requires party leaders and committee chairs (who now must be confirmed by secret ballot) to pledge allegiance to a legislative agenda at the start of each Congress. Reaching across party lines is unlikely to be rewarded in such a partisan climate—something Senator John Chafee

**Table 1. Size of the Political Center, by Chamber and Party, 1959–96**

CONGRESS (YRS)	AS PERCENT OF PARTY			
	HOUSE		SENATE	
	CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRATS	MODERATE REPUBLICANS	CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRATS	MODERATE REPUBLICANS
86 (1959–60)	32.0	17.7	23.1	31.4
87 (1961–62)	33.1	20.1	23.1	28.6
88 (1963–64)	33.0	22.0	25.4	27.3
89 (1965–66)	29.0	19.3	26.5	28.1
90 (1967–68)	34.0	18.7	31.3	22.2
91 (1969–70)	34.2	19.4	31.6	37.2
92 (1971–72)	32.6	23.9	31.5	27.3
93 (1973–74)	31.3	23.4	28.1	35.7
94 (1975–76)	29.2	22.2	28.3	34.2
95 (1977–78)	30.8	23.1	31.7	34.2
96 (1979–80)	29.0	21.4	29.3	29.3
97 (1981–82)	29.1	19.8	23.9	24.5
98 (1983–84)	25.8	16.8	26.1	24.1
99 (1985–86)	24.9	14.8	25.5	26.4
100 (1987–88)	25.2	15.8	23.6	26.7
101 (1989–90)	20.8	18.2	23.6	22.2
102 (1991–92)	20.5	12.6	9.1	24.4
103 (1993–94)	14.6	9.6	3.5	19.6
104 (1995–96)	18.0	5.5	2.1	14.8

Source: See notes for figure 1.

discovered after trying unsuccessfully to negotiate a bipartisan solution to the health care debate in 1994. In the House, several moderate Republicans were passed over for committee chairmanships when their party captured the majority in 1994. Carlos Moorhead, a conservative Republican from California with a reputation for conciliation, was in line to chair both the Commerce Committee and the Judiciary Committee and failed to get either—because, his chief aide contended, Speaker Newt Gingrich had let it be known that Moorhead was “just not mean enough.”

Increased polarization may have the most profound effects in the Senate. Unlike the House, where simple partisan majorities can prevail over minority opposition, bipartisan agreement is all but essential in the Senate. Unless the majority in the Senate has a filibuster-proof roster of 60 senators consistently willing to cut off debate, it will continually be stymied by minority opposition. Much of the legislation that grew out of the House Republican Contract with America in 1995 languished and died in the Senate despite the support of the majority—a fate that illustrates well the effects of ideologically distant parties in the Senate.

Of course, the ideological centers of the two parties are not fixed in stone. In fact, as the congressional elections approach, many voters seem apprehensive about the excesses of the Republican majority, and congressional Democrats seem determined to moderate their platform and image. It may be that voters will nudge the two parties back to the center—giving the political center a reprieve from its predicted demise. ■