

A cartoon illustration featuring a donkey on the left and an elephant on the right, both dressed in suits and standing behind wooden podiums. The background consists of a red and white striped banner with a blue band containing white stars and the word "VOTE" in large red letters. The text "CONGRESS: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES" is overlaid in the center in a bold, black, serif font with a white outline.

**CONGRESS:  
THE ROLE OF  
POLITICAL PARTIES**

# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

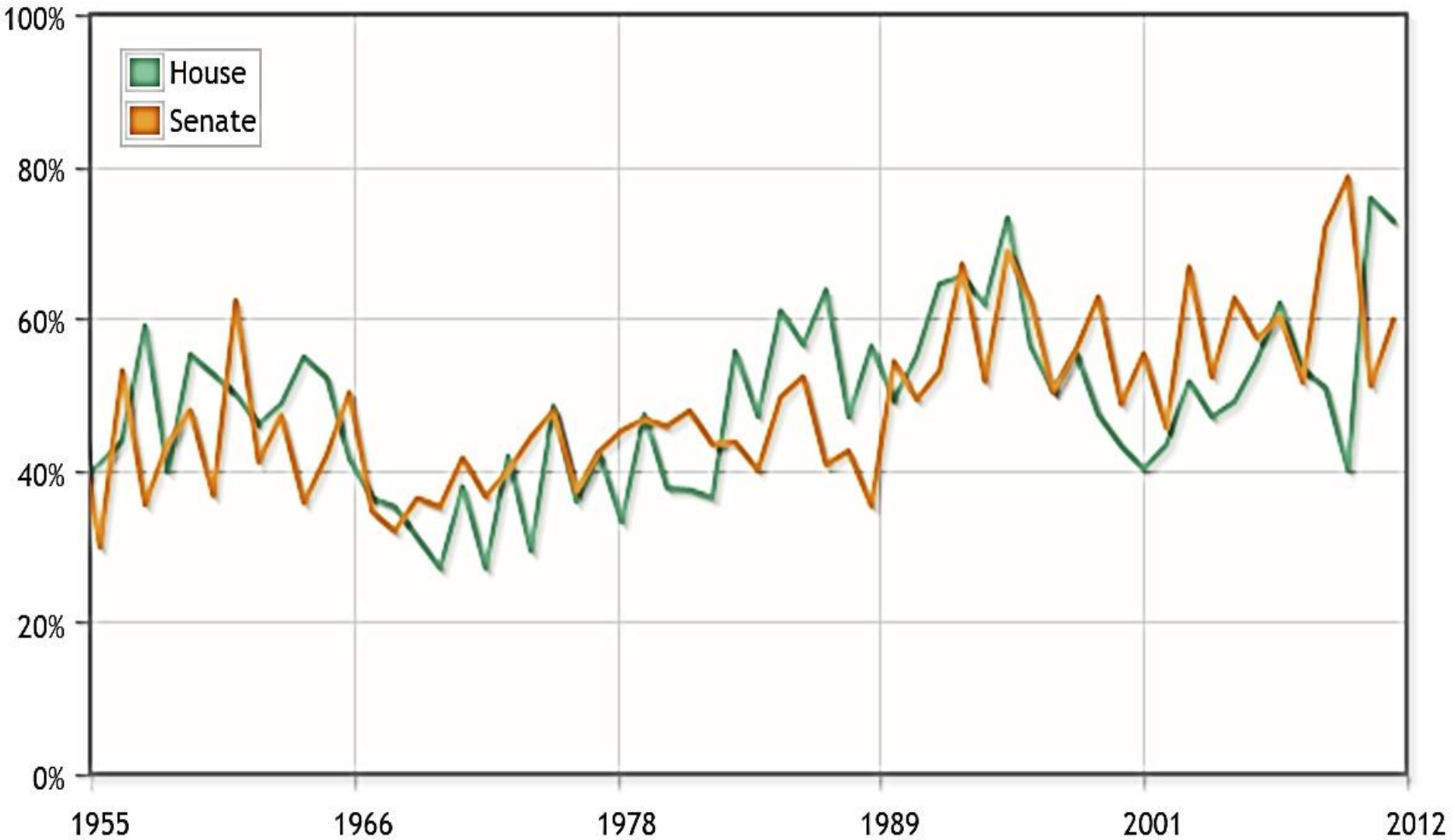
- Parties not in Constit but have always been signif factor in operation of Congress
- GOP & Dem Party dominate Congr – almost imposs for cand outside these 2 parties to get elected – those that do have to caucus with one of them to have any impact in Congr. (e.g. Indeps Lieberman, Sanders- & explicitly so with Angus King)
- Party leadership structures for both maj and min parties in each House.
- Maj party in House get to elect Speaker, in control of v powerful Rules Cttee.
- Maj party in each chamber get to have maj on each cttee, incl its v powerful Chair.
- Leadership can use control of procedures (House Rules Cttee) to bypass elements of textbook legisl process – e.g. Pelosi and anti-abortion amendmt to Health Reform, Reid and public option, Boehner blocking China currency bill
- Party leaderships can also use Reconciliation and Conf cttee process to craft compromise (e.g. on Bush *No Child Left Behind Act*, Ryan-Murray Budget deal 2013)

# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

## BUT –

- US parties have historically been much broader than British pol parties, with major overlaps between mod Reps and con Dems.
- and party discipline has trad been much weaker than in the UK, with many votes not on partisan lines and much bi-partisan coop.
- + sep of powers/ personnel means that patronage poss of party leaderships is v limited compared to HoC, while cttee chairs being awarded on seniority meant longest-standing members, often v indep in their positions and electorally secure in their own districts, had key positions of indep power.
- Elect campaigns v diff to UK, with hundreds of separate races around the country focused on partic candidate, rather than being a party-focused nat election (= referendum?) as in UK. Ability to channel funding/legisl benefits to state/district v imp in ensuring re-election – trumps party loyalty.

# Party unity votes in Congress - % of votes where a majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republicans

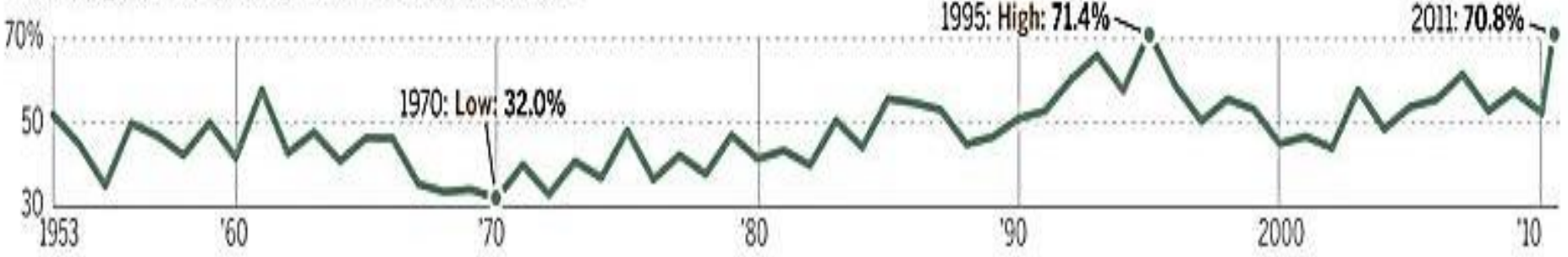


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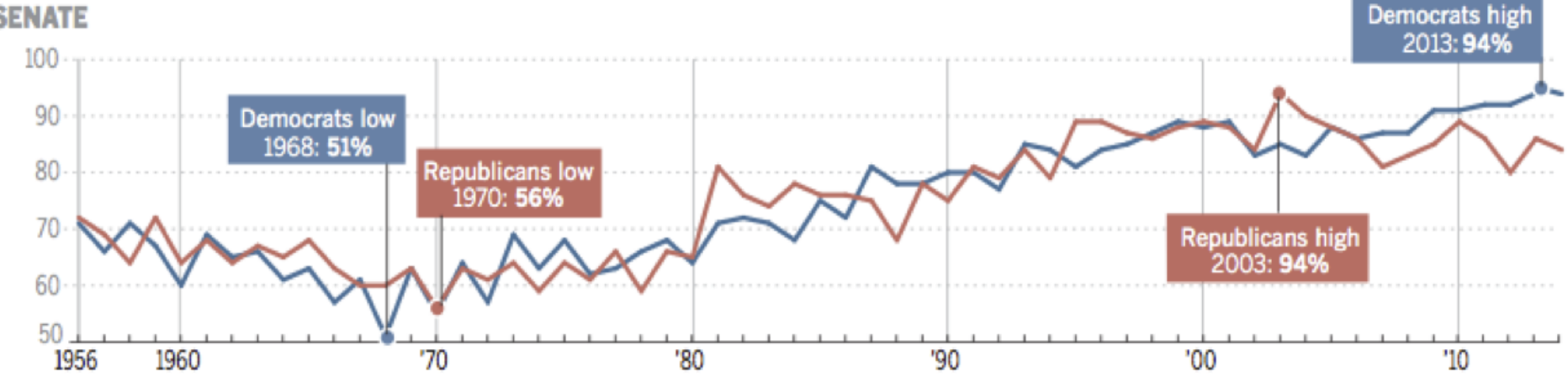
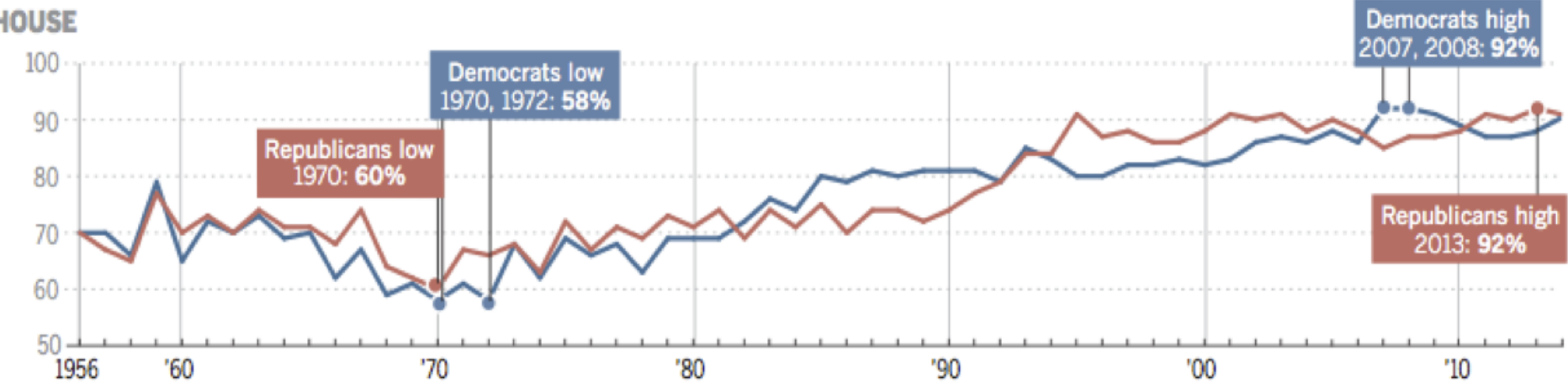
## CHANGE?

- parties have grown in imp since early 1990s, most legisl votes now on party lines (see graph re. party unity votes)
  - - e.g. Obama stimulus bill saw almost unanimous partisan voting, despite his strenuous efforts to gain Rep support.
  - Clinton impeach vote in 1998 was also almost entirely partisan.
- parties have also becoming more ideol homogenous, with decline in mod “Rockefeller” Republicans from NE and conservative Dems from south. V apparent in polarisation over abortion since 1990.
- Congr election campaigns are incr national, with party platforms more like UK manifestos – e.g. 1994 Republicans’ Contract with America, 2006 Democrats’ 6 for 06.
- building a pol career in Washington now requires more demonstrs of loyalty, so that you can rise to leadership positions in party and senior cttee posts.
  - e.g Boehner at the end of the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress removed 4 hardline conservatives from Budget and Finance Committees as they hadn’t been loyal enough to the GOP line.
  - But moratorium on earmarks makes it hard to buy support for bills

# Percentage of Party Unity Votes for Congress as a whole



# Average party unity scores



# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

## The Speaker of the House of Representatives

- Role of Speaker in House has become more imp in providing party leadership -> more partisan voting / behaviour
- **Newt Gingrich, Sp 94-98 - highly committed conservative Rep**
  - led H Republicans in a con direction, using successful common manif (“Contract with America”) in 94 mid-terms to unite party ideologically
  - dedicated to defeating pol agenda of Pres Clinton, imposing con legisl agenda instead, e.g. term limits, welfare reform, flag desecration amendment
  - Clinton tried to claim credit for successful Welfare Reform in 97, but it was a remarkably con measure (limiting period for unempl ben claims, pushing resp from fed govt back to states via block grants, making single mothers look for work) – can be seen as Reps in Congress capturing his Presidency.
  - Worked with Maj Whip Tom DeLay to ensure party discipline in voting on ideol signif issues
  - change in cttee chair rules allowed Gingrich & DeLay to block mods inclined to compr with Dems from these key roles
  - ideol campaign symbolised by impeach of Pres Clinton for lying re fin/sexual affairs.
  - Greater Rep unity and partisanship in Congress pushed Dems towards greater party loyalty too (see graphs)
  - Gingrich’s authority and success in imposing a new degree of party discipline (esp compared to Dem failures 92-94) led him to be compared to a British PM

# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

- **Dennis Hastert succeeded Gingrich as Speaker 1998-2006**
  - initially seen as a more mod & low-key compromise candidate, winning Sp when DeLay decided he was too divisive a figure. Hastert pledged a bipartisan approach.
  - but in 2004 adopted a “majority of the majority” policy so that House only got to vote on bills supported by a majority of Republicans – meant Dems had no chance of claiming credit for any legisl success
  - also blocked appt of cttee chairs seen as insuff loyal to GOP
  - worked closely with Pres Bush post-9/11
  - adopted low-key profile compared to Gingrich, (arguably) allowing Maj Whip (later Maj Leader) Tom DeLay to dominate the Rep party and its House agenda
  - DeLay highly successful as party manager, successfully whipping 300 out of 303 votes in 104th Congress – known as “The Hammer” for his bullying style in ensuring Rep reps backed Pres Bush’s legisl agenda – hence Bush vetoed no bills 2000-2006. Can also be argued Bush Admin was given easy ride in terms of scrutiny.
  - DeLay strongly associated Reps with con values agenda.
  - DeLay also associated with aggressive Rep efforts to ensure redistricting in states locked in Rep pol dominance of Congress.



# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

- **Speaker Nancy Pelosi**

- Pelosi Min Leader of Dems in House 2003-07, taking over as Speaker following Dem win in 2006 mid-terms. Resumed as Min leader Jan '11.
- 1st female Speaker
- well to the left of Dem party, rep'ing lib city of San Francisco in California
- Seen as pushing a partisan legisl agenda in the manner of Gingrich, but in a lib direction
- V strong scrutiny of Bush White House 2007-8 – e.g. 2007 investigation into sacking of Justice Dept lawyers led to resign of Attorney Gen Gonzalez.
- Confronted Bush with plan to force withdrawal of troops from Iraq, allow fed money to be used for stem cell research, expand programmes to ensure children got medical cover (SCHIP) – attracting 12 vetoes and overriding 4 of these.
- not nec always in tune with Obama White House (e.g. public option on Health Care, resisting bi-part Comm on tax reform, criticism of China)
- But Dems seen as less unified party than Reps (see graph)
- Dems still favour cttee apptmts on seniority, which means ideol & party loyalty not as imp as with R apptments.

# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

## Speaker John Boehner

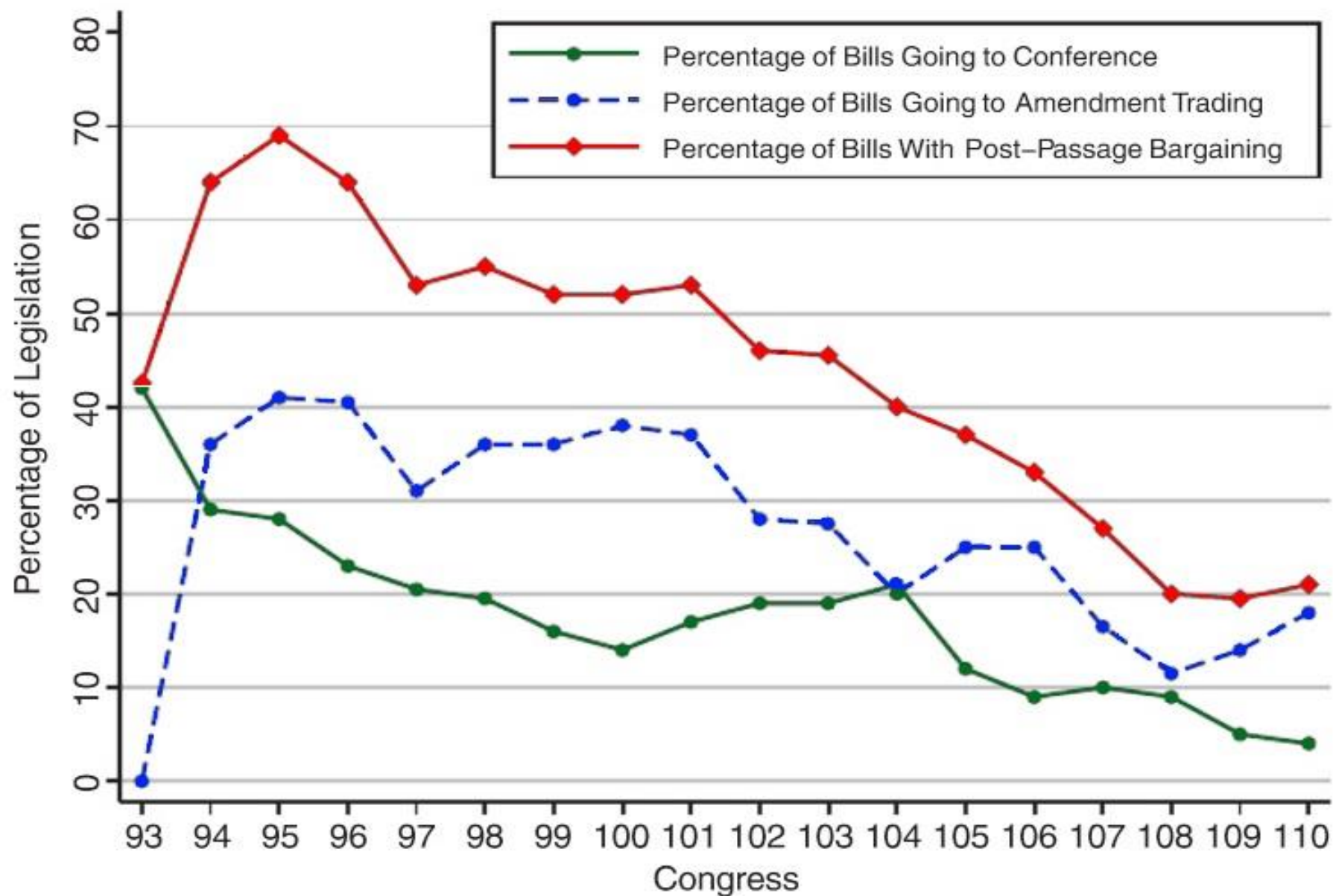
- Boehner has represented Ohio's 8<sup>th</sup> District since 1991. Became Speaker in Jan 2011 following GOP's takeover of House in Nov 2010 mid-terms.
- Previously Boehner Minority Leader 2007-2010, Majority Leader 2006-7. Previously served as GOP Conference Chair 1995-99 (4<sup>th</sup> in line), working under Gingrich, with whom he wrote *Contract with America* in '94, & DeLay.
- Boehner campaigned vs corrupt practices in Congress in early 90s, & stood for Maj Leader as a reforming candidate in 2006 on the resignation of DeLay, opposing the use of earmarks and calling for less govt spending.
- Seen as a traditional pro-business Republican with strong links to corporate lobbyists, and is distrusted by some religious conservatives. As a legislator he has been a classic negotiator rather than a strict ideologue – e.g. major input into *No Child Left Behind*, backed Bush's banks bailout in late 2008 -> distrust from more ideological tea-party Republicans.
- Speaker Boehner has overseen a moratorium on use of earmarks & brought a range of conservative measures to a vote (e.g. to repeal Obamacare, a *Cut, Cap & Balance Act*, defending *Defence of Marriage Act*).
- In negotiations over the debt ceiling in August 2011 & since, Boehner under pressure from Tea Partiers in House Freedom Caucus not to compromise with Dems
  - had to go back on possible 2011 deal budget with Obama in face of resistance from GOP House members.
  - Did help craft 2011 "supercommittee" compromise but opposed Jobs Bill
  - humiliated over Jan 2013 Fiscal Cliff when his "Plan B" failed and he ended up voting for a deal opposed by most of his majority – his majority was "rolled", "Hastert rule abandoned".
  - Majority also rolled in 2013 on aid for Hurricane Sandy victims, renewing Violence against Women Act, and on October Govt Shutdown/Debt Ceiling deal + [6 other occasions](#)
  - 25 GOP reps voted vs re-election as Speaker in Jan 2015 – biggest such rebellion in 90 yrs
  - House Freedom Caucus moved vs Boehner July 2015, he resigned as Speaker 25<sup>th</sup> Sept 15

# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

## PARTY LEADERSHIP & THE DECLINE OF CONFERENCE CTTEES

- **Only 3 conference reports in 113<sup>th</sup> Congress**
  - Agriculture Act, Water Resources reform, Veterans Access Act
- **only 7 conference reports 112<sup>th</sup> Congress**
  - e.g. FAA Air Transportation Modernization and Safety Improvement Act, a Transport investment bill - but other 5 all appropriations or other finance (= money bills)
  - 13 Conf reports 111<sup>th</sup> Congress (9 essentially on money bills)
  - 16 Conf reports for 110<sup>th</sup> Congress (7 essentially on money bills)
  - 27 Conf reports for 109<sup>th</sup> Congress (20 essentially on money bills)
- But in 113<sup>th</sup> Congress a Conference Cttee reached a budget compromise – Dem Sen Patty Murray & GOP Rep Paul Ryan leading
  - <http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2013/12/budget-deal>
- Commentary:
  - <http://www.american.edu/spa/ccps/upload/Bring-back-the-conference-committees.pdf>
  - [http://www.ilonanickels.com/CC\\_conferencedecline.html](http://www.ilonanickels.com/CC_conferencedecline.html)
  - [http://www.academia.edu/3507297/The\\_Disappearing\\_Conference\\_Committee\\_The\\_Use\\_of\\_Procedures\\_by\\_Minority\\_Coalitions\\_to\\_Prevent\\_Conferencing](http://www.academia.edu/3507297/The_Disappearing_Conference_Committee_The_Use_of_Procedures_by_Minority_Coalitions_to_Prevent_Conferencing)

FIGURE 1. The Disappearing Conference Committee: The Use of Procedures by Minority Coalitions to Prevent Conferencing—The Frequency of Congressional Bargaining Venues, 93rd-110th Congresses.



# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

## BUT

- Views / interests of districts (“folks back home”) still v imp in affecting how members vote, even if these point against party line, e.g. Dems from energy-dep states over cap and trade,
- Congr electoral campaigns are still candidate-centred, unlike in UK where they are heavily focused on national parties. Role of primaries means that a safe Rep or Dem seat may not be safe for a partic Congressman if they upset local opinion.
- Senate not as ideol or partisan as House (turned down Con amendments), although it has become more so than before. Need for 60 votes to break filibuster means that some bipartisan support needed for most measures in a way that isn’t as necessary in the House (e.g. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act had it, Obama’s Jobs Bill in 2011 didn’t)
- Int affairs often less partisan – because “folks back home” know and care less about it? But always exceptions (Test Ban Treaty) & perhaps these are increasing (Dem efforts vs Iraq surge in 2007, GOP criticism of Obama on Libya & Israel – though Syria split both parties, Netanyahu 2015 visit divisive)

# CONGRESS: ROLE OF PARTIES

- ideol appr & strong party unity of Reps 1994-2006 now seen as contributing to their eventual unpop & downfall (masked for a while by post-9/11 rallying effect?)
- Reps had probs living up to their ideol agenda:
  - scandals involving leaders (Gingrich, Livingstone, DeLay)
  - term limit pledges of many new Congr in 94 breached
  - weakening of conservative unity due to tensions between
    - “values” agenda, e.g. expansion of fed govt role in some areas like education, anti-gay marriage, right to life
    - “small govt” conservatives who value states rights and want lower taxes above anything else
    - populists who want tougher immigration controls and reject trade liberalisation, deficit budgets, etc.
    - “business” conservatives who favour freer migration and want trade deals, supported bank bailouts in 2008
  - Bush ultimately seen as “big govt”, selling out principles of small-govt Contract with America
  - earmarks continued to be sought, incl by con members, and their size grew over this period
  - + unpop of Bush in second term led many Reps to emphasise their indep
- But GOP ideological willingness in 2013 to shutdown Govt & risk debt default didn't lead to punishment at the polls in 2014 midterms