

**Paper 205: Government and Politics of the U.S.A. ·  
Lecture 13**

# **Political Parties in the USA**

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# Introduction

- Schattschneider: “modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties”
- Stability and change:
  - most enduring two-party system
  - rapid change in underlying behaviour
  - “Parties are failing” to ultrapartisanship

# The party decline literature I

- Some titles from the reading list ca 2000
  - Wattenberg: *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952-96*
  - Silbey chapter: *The Rise and Fall of American Political Parties, 1790-1990*
  - Broder: *The Party's Over*
- a definite theme...

# The party decline literature II

- Parties as disempowered & disengaged, if perhaps still enduring (qv APSA report 1950, *Towards a More Responsible Two Party System*)
- Concerns about party *reform* esp of Presidential nomination post 1968
  - Shafer *Quiet Revolution, Bifurcated Politics*
- A more positive reading: Epstein *Political Parties in the American Mold*
  - Parties responsive to their political and social environment, different but not lesser
  - “Parties as public utilities”

# Three enduring facets

- two party system
- dominance of public office
- regulation and state oversight: “public utilities”

# Two party systems

- Virginia dynasty: evolving into Federalists and Democrat-Republicans
- Jacksonian democracy: Democrats and Whigs
- Civil War and Reconstruction: Democrats and Republicans
- Republican domination: Democrats and Republicans
- The New Deal: Democrats and Republicans
- The modern party system: Democrats and Republicans

# Party in public office

- last non R/D ticket to win Presidency: Taylor/Fillmore
- since 1860 only in 1896 have R/D held less than 95 per cent of Congress
- dominance of partisan elected posts at lower levels too (judges)
- 3rd party Pres candidates over 5% in last 50 years:
  - Wallace 1968 - 14% (plus won 45 EV)
  - Anderson 1980 - 7%
  - Perot 1992 - 19%, 1996 - 8%

# Parties as public utilities I

- nominally private but restricted, closely regulated, incentivised
- Progressive era reforms:
  - secret ballot
  - regulation of membership/party registration
  - regulation of party structures (committees)
  - direct primary (not yet for President)



# Parties as public utilities II

- Civil rights litigation on primaries in the one-party South:
  - Primaries as public elections: *US v Classic* (1941)
  - Race and primaries: *Nixon v. Herndon* (1927); *Smith v. Allwright* (1944); *Terry v. Adams* (1953) (& eventually on to the Voting Rights Act)
- “Quiet revolution” and McGovern-Fraser Commission
  - direct primary & the modern presidential nomination process

# Parties as public utilities III

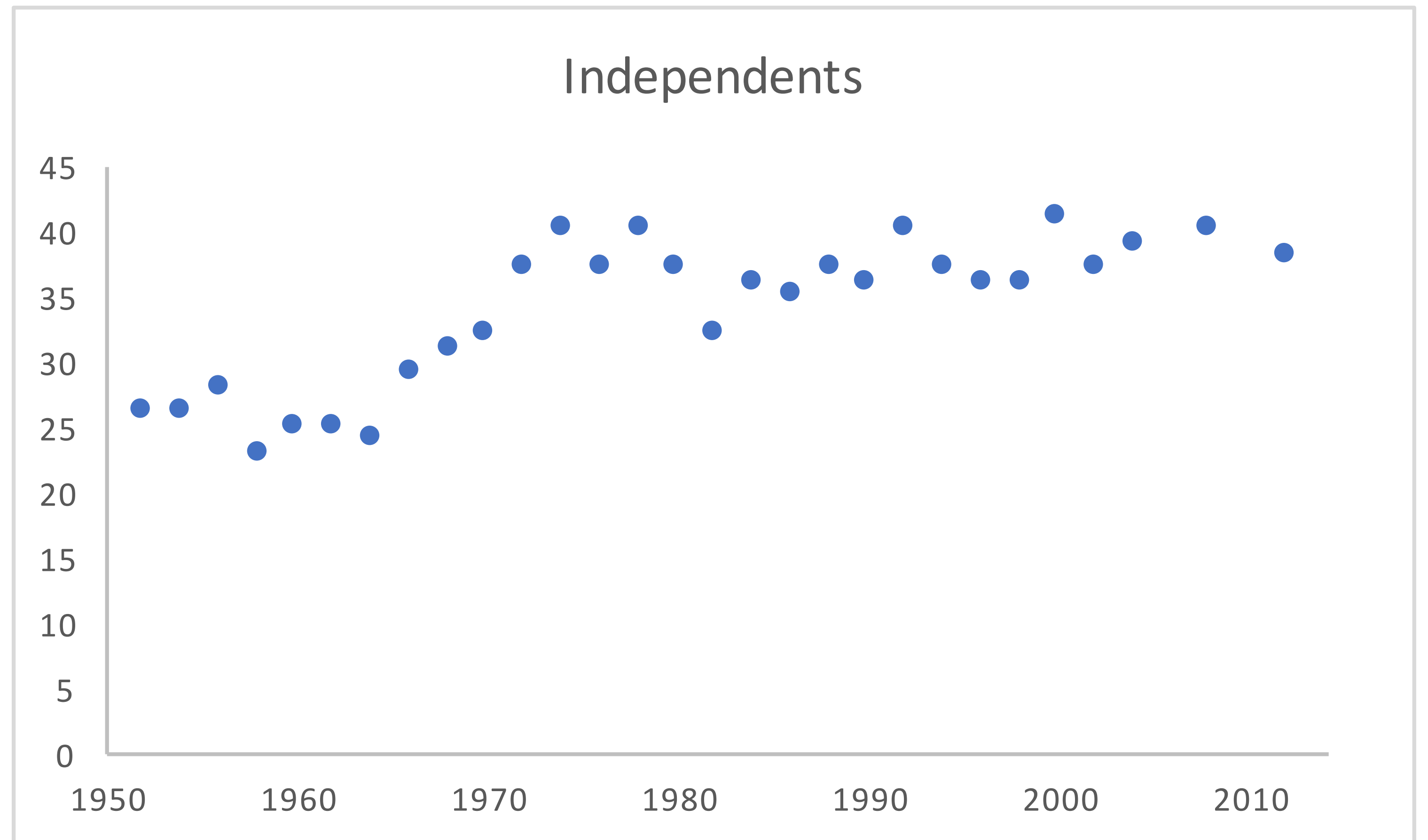
- Campaign finance legislation and litigation
  - Federal Election Campaign Act 1971 *et sequitur*; *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976)
  - Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act 2002; *McConnell v. FEC* (2003); *FEC v. Wisconsin Right to Life* (2007), *Davis v. FEC* (2008), and *Citizens United v. FEC* (2009)
- Parties regulated by (mainly) state governments and (also) Federal government dominated by parties regulated by ...

# Parties in the electorate: rising independents?

- Graph 1: what % of electorate describe themselves as “independents”?
- “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

# Independent voters... (%)

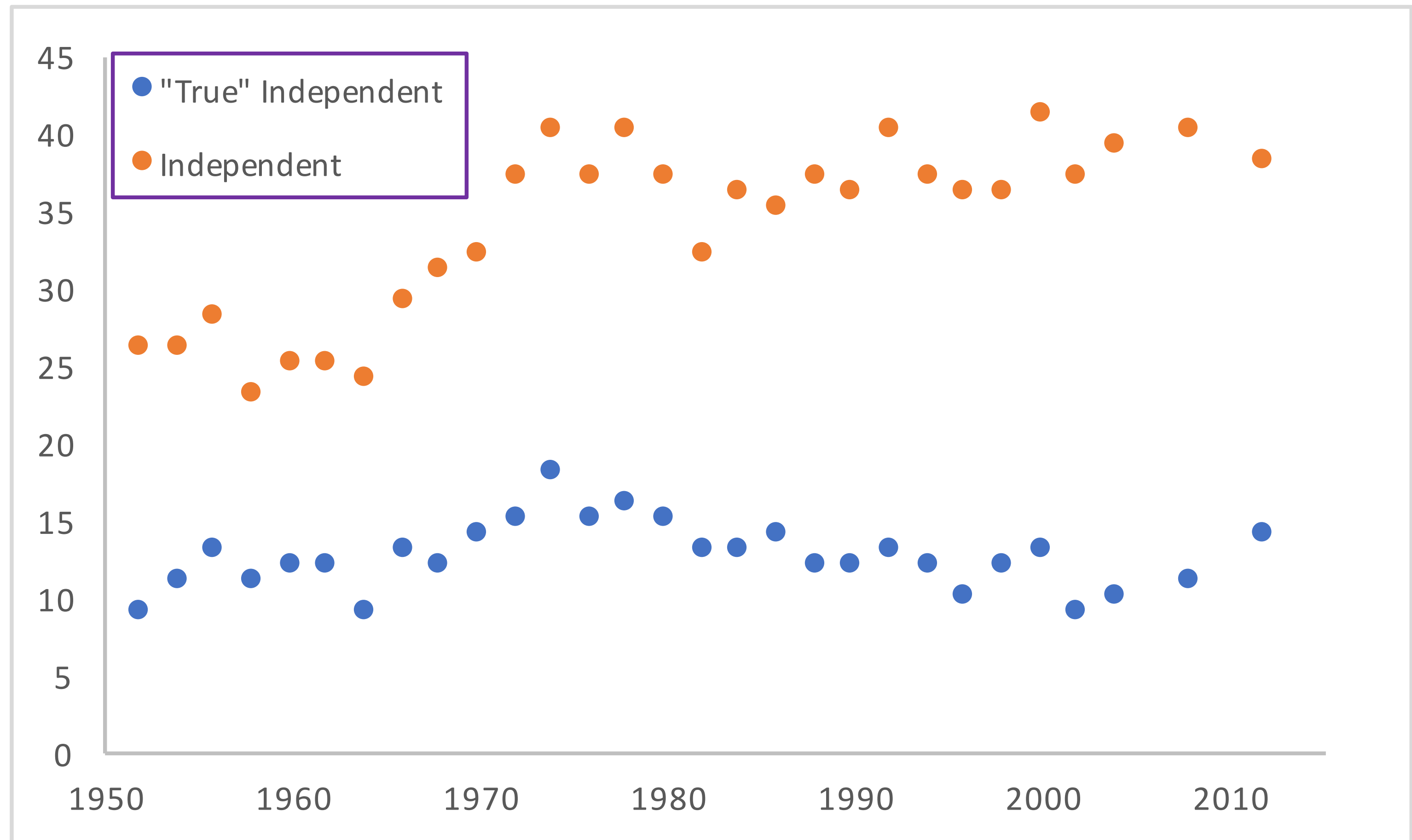
Source: ANES



# Parties in the electorate: rising independents?

- Graph I: what % of electorate describe themselves as “independents”?
  - “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”
- Graph II: “true” independents versus “leaning”:
  - *“Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?”*

**...versus  
“true”  
independents  
(%)**  
**Source: ANES**

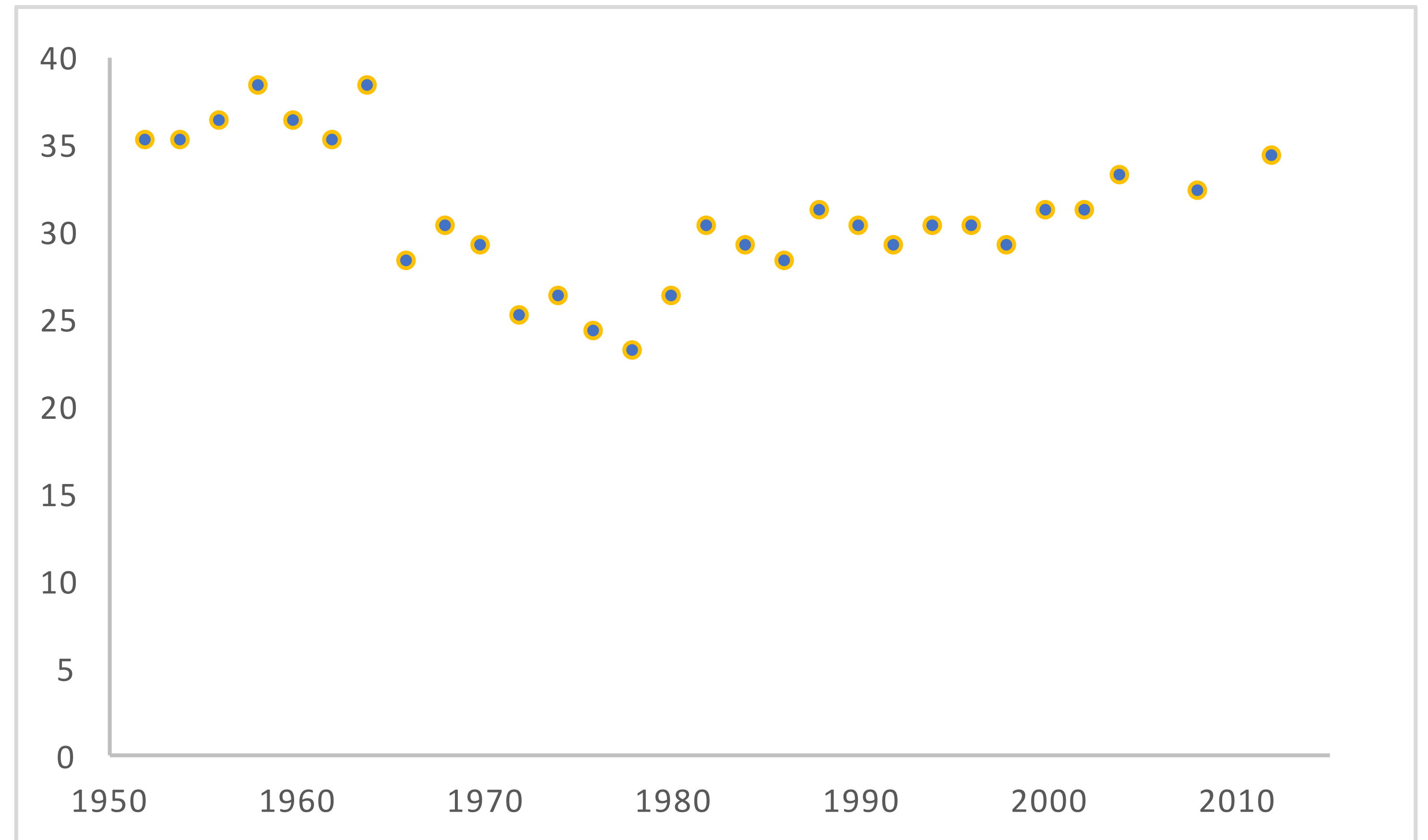


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- Graph III: “strong” partisans
  - “Would you call yourself a strong (REPUBLICAN/DEMOCRAT) or a not very strong (REPUBLICAN/DEMOCRAT)?”

# Strong partisans (%)

Source: ANES



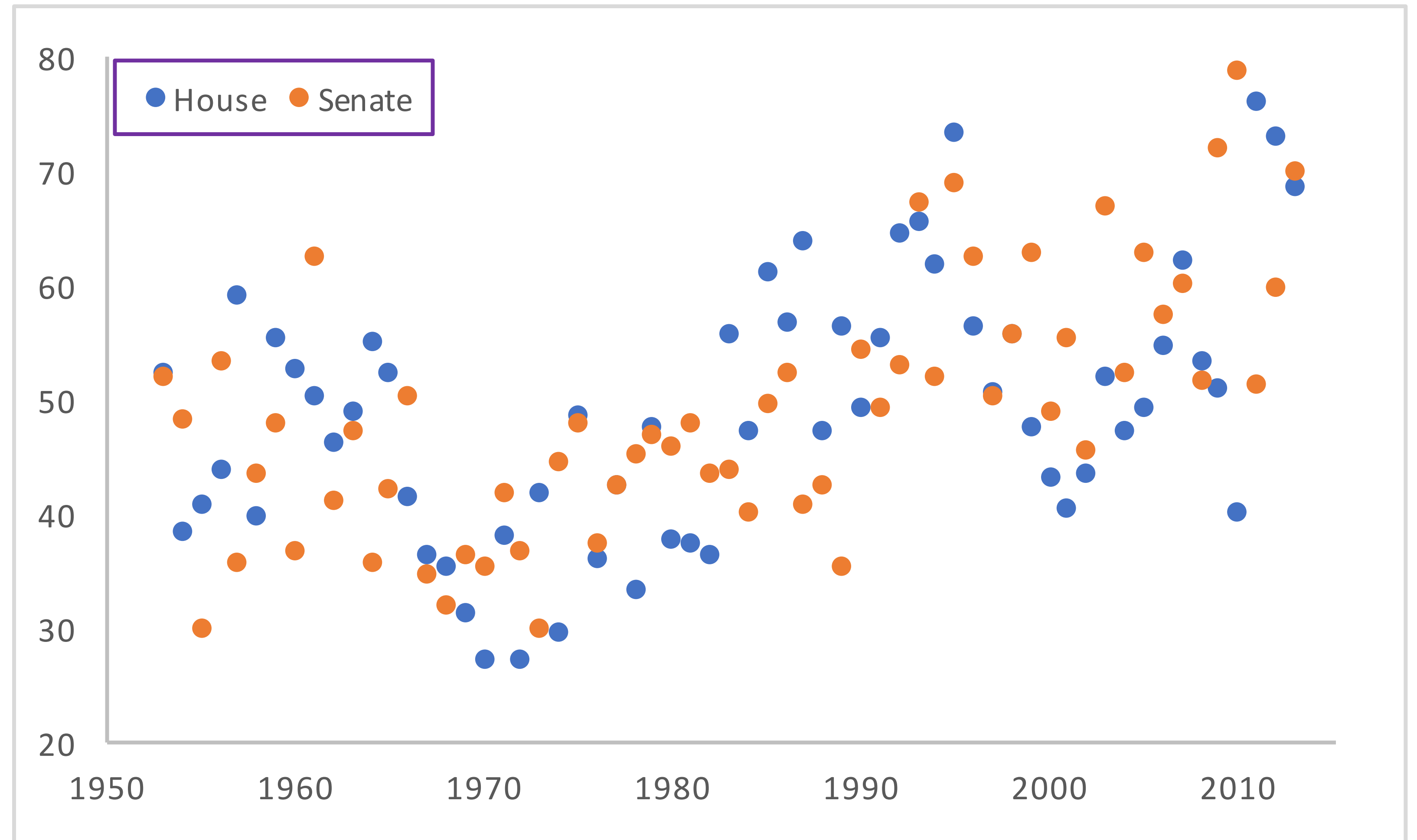


# Partisanship in Congress

- Are the parties opposed to each other?
  - “Party unity votes”: votes involve majority of one party in each chamber voting against majority of the other. What % of all votes are Party Unity Votes?

# Party Unity Votes %

Brookings “Vital  
Statistics”

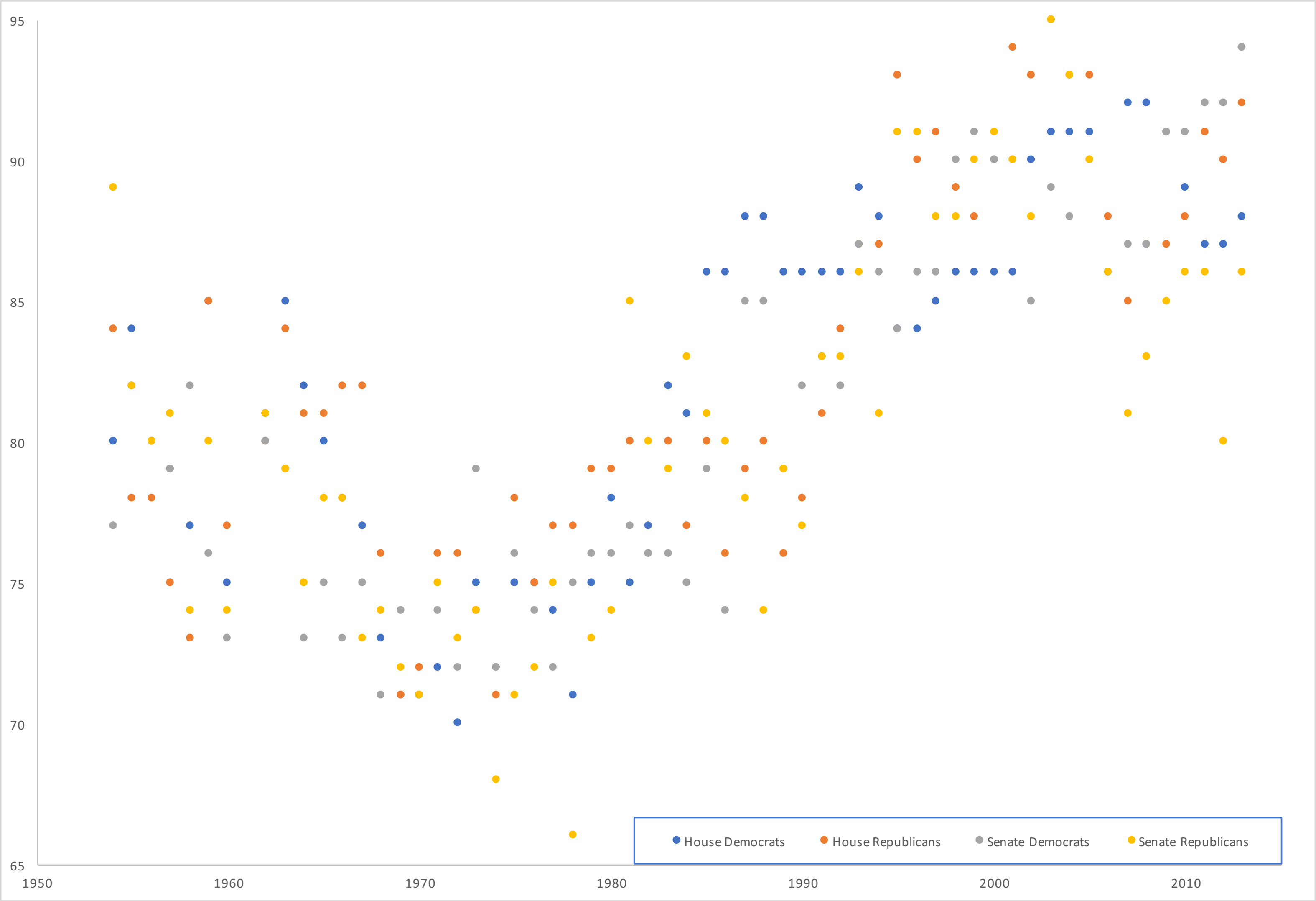


# Partisanship in Congress

- Are the parties opposed to each other?
  - “Party unity votes”: votes involve majority of one party in each chamber voting against majority of the other. What % of all votes are Party Unity Votes?
- But *how* opposed are they - PUV could be 50%+1 vs 50%+1, or could be 100% vs 100%
- “Party unity scores”: on average, in party unity votes, what % of each party in each chamber votes with their party? (range = 50%+1 to 100%)

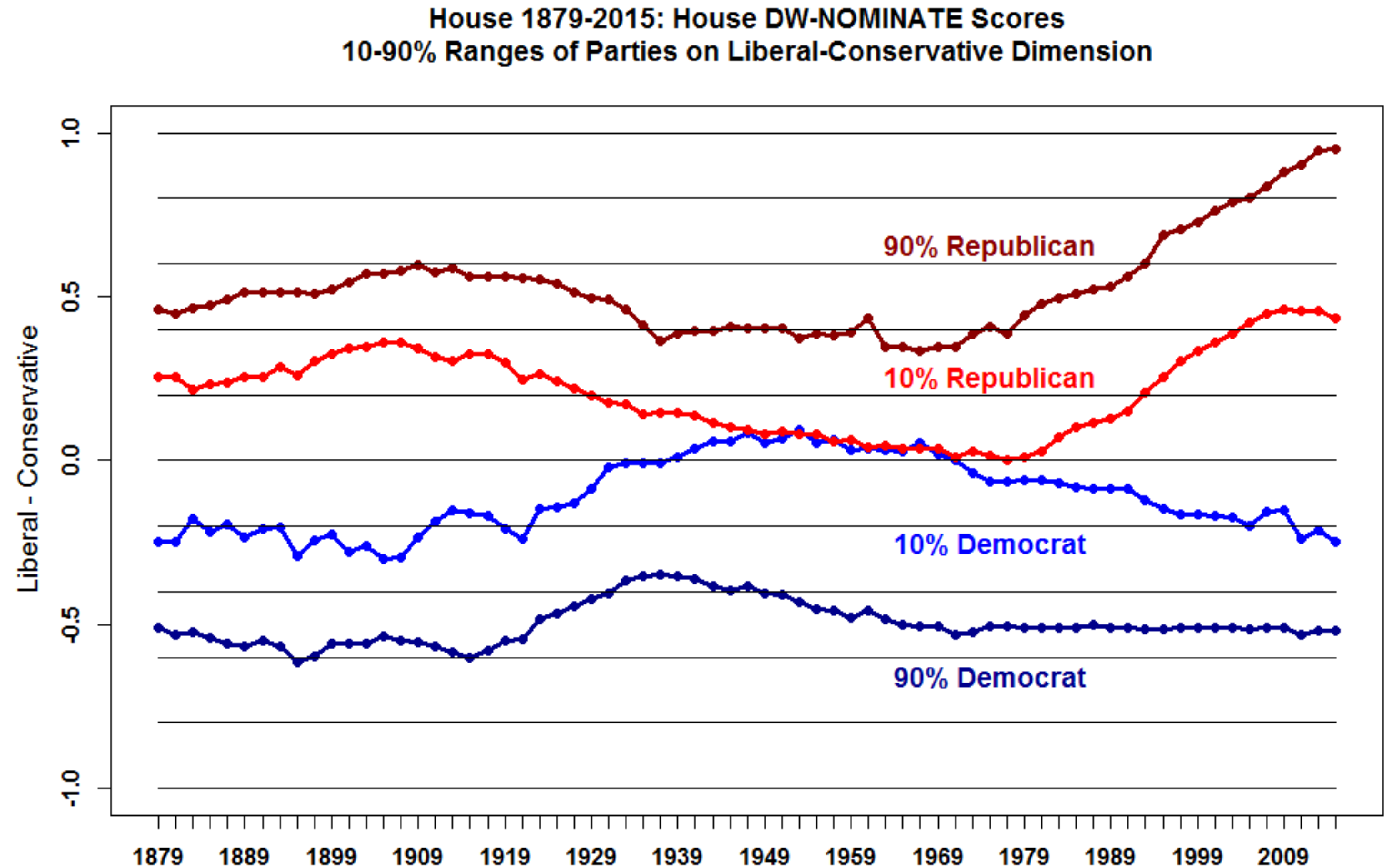
# Party Unity Scores %

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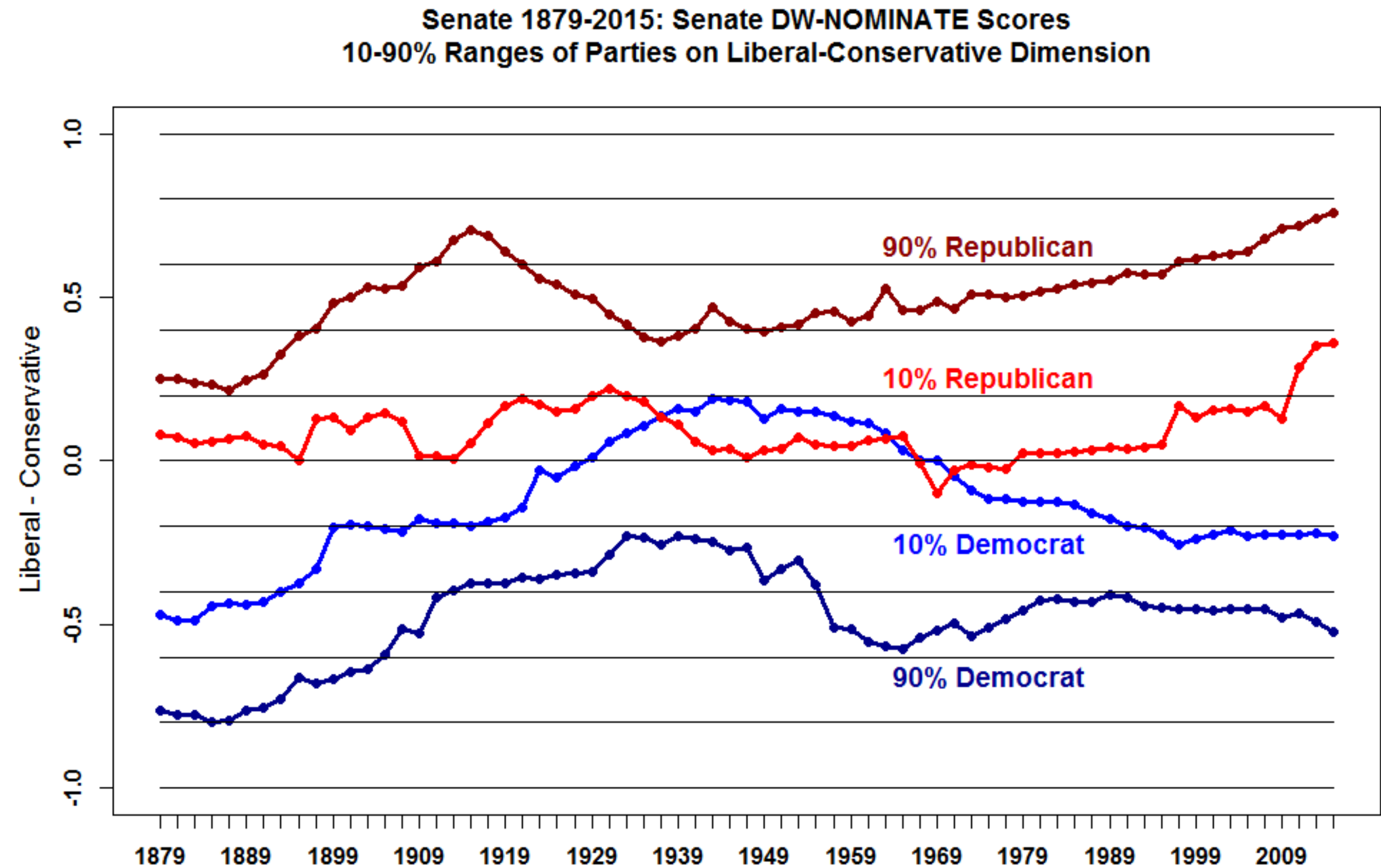
# DW-NOMINATE scores

Source: Poole & Rosenthal



# DW-NOMINATE scores

Source: Poole & Rosenthal



## Recovering parties: Are they different *kinds* of party?

- *Asymmetric Politics* - Grossman & Hopkins 2016
  - Asymmetry: different kind of social base  $\Rightarrow$  different kind of goals  $\Rightarrow$  different kinds of party (each with their own logic)
  - Democrats as a party of *constituency* (driven by *politically engaged groups* with *pragmatic interests*)
  - Republicans as a party of *ideas* (driven by *ideological activists* with *ideological goals*)
- Implicit source of governing problems - difference between parties makes their engagement less productive - each wrongly sees the other party as a mirror image of themselves

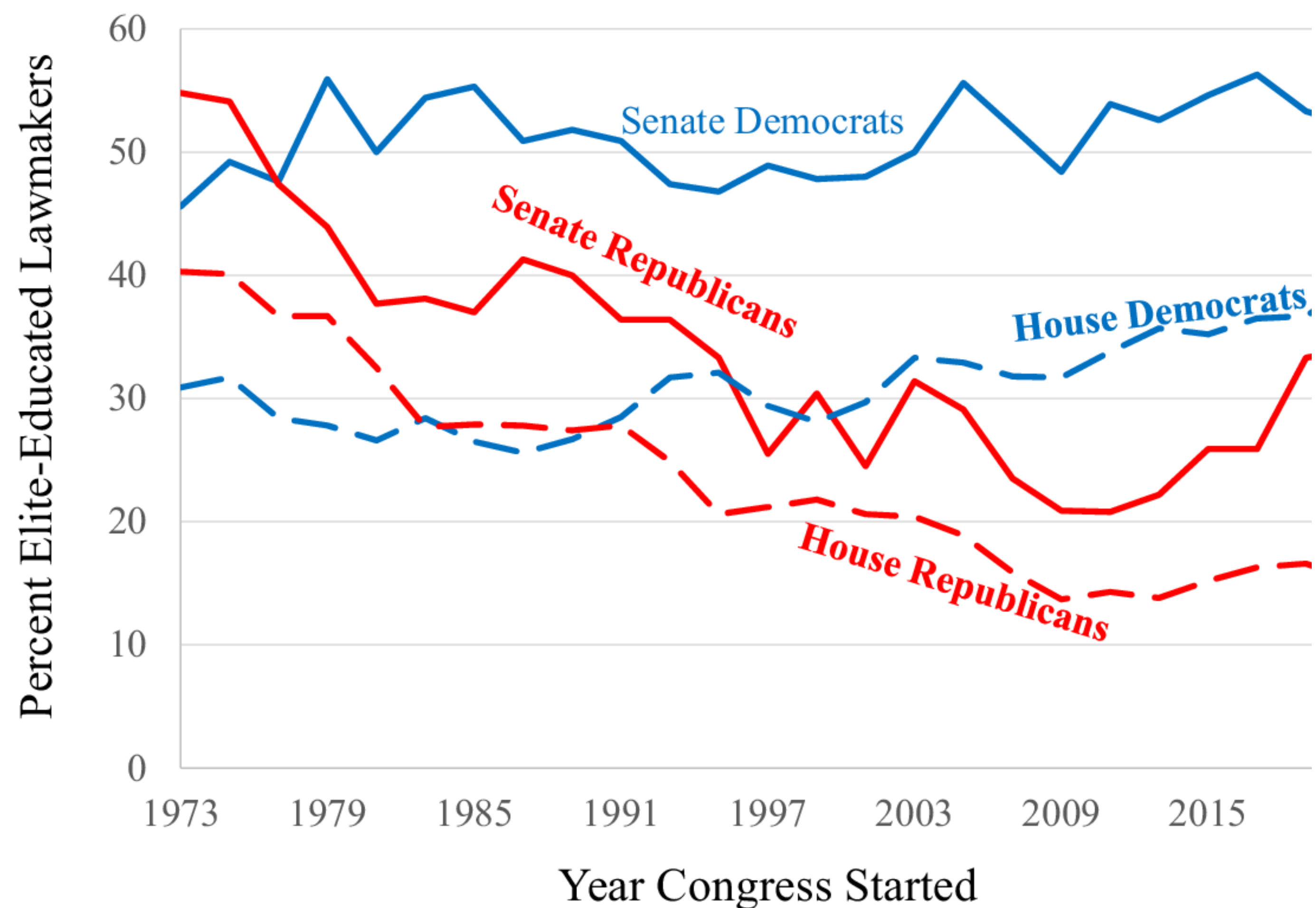
## **Recovering parties: *The Party Decides* (or does it?)**

- (Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller 2012)
- Party control of nominations appeared in trouble under McGovern-Fraser - eg nominations of McGovern, Carter
- But reborn! eg Kerry vs Dean for Dem nomination in 2004
  - The “invisible primary” & a new party elite: “elected officials, top fund-raisers, interest group leaders, campaign organisers, and ordinary activists” - endorsements as a key measure
  - but not hierarchical, disciplined party control - inchoate process...
- but 2016...



# Changing patterns of representation

## Elite education and Congress



# Conclusions

- Parties have changed over time
- The impact of polarisation is not uniform; parties not symmetrical
- parties remain in the “American mold” in some ways
- institutional party decline hasn’t been replaced by strong autonomous institutions
- Sidebar: see Lee (2016) on whether the C19th was polarised

