

Why Has US Policy Uncertainty Risen Since 1960?[†]

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We consider two classes of explanations for the rise in policy-related economic uncertainty in the United States since 1960. The first stresses growth in government spending, taxes, and regulation. A second stresses increased political polarization and its implications for the policy-making process and policy choices.

I. Rising Policy Uncertainty

There appears to be a strong upward drift in policy-related uncertainty after 1960. As evidence, Figure 1 plots a newspaper-based index of economic policy uncertainty (EPU) for the United States, showing a secular rise over the last half century. The EPU index, drawn from Baker, Bloom, and Davis (2013), relies on scaled frequency counts of newspaper articles that contain terms pertaining to the economy, uncertainty, and economic policy.¹ Baker, Bloom, and Davis (2013) also find a strong rise in the frequency of

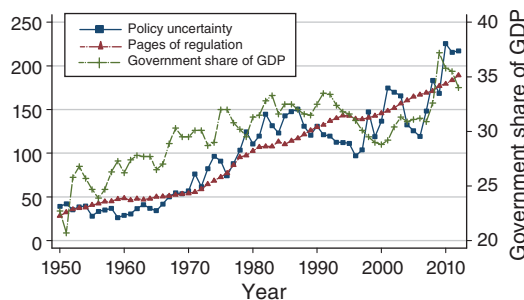


FIGURE 1. US ECONOMIC POLICY UNCERTAINTY AND GOVERNMENT ACTIVITY

Notes: US Economic Policy Uncertainty Index from Baker, Bloom, and Davis (2013); total government spending (federal, state, and local) as a percent of GDP from BEA; *Code of Federal Regulations* page count from Dawson and Seater (2013), spliced to data from Crews (2013, Figure 12) for 2006 to 2012. The EPU and CFR data are scaled to 100 from 1949 to 2012.

discussions of policy-related uncertainty in the Federal Reserve's periodic Beige Book releases from 1983 (first release) to 2012, suggesting that Beige Book survey respondents also perceive a rise in policy uncertainty. This rise in economic policy uncertainty is potentially damaging to US growth (Bloom 2013).

II. Policy Uncertainty and the Scale of Government Activity

Alongside the EPU index, Figure 1 plots two measures for the scale of government activity. One measure shows the rise in government spending from about 20 percent of GDP in the early 1950s to about 35 percent by 2010. This secular increase likely brought with it a greater prevalence and intensity of concerns related to uncertainty about government spending programs and about tax rates and rules. Figure 1 also reports a page count index for the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR), an annual publication that

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[†]Go to <http://dx.doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.5.56> to visit the article page for additional materials and author disclosure statement(s).

¹Specifically, Baker, Bloom, and Davis (2013) search the digital archives of six newspapers (*Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*) for articles containing “uncertain” or “uncertainty”; plus “economy,” “economic,” “industry,” “industrial,” “commerce,” or “business”; plus “congress,” “deficit,” “federal reserve,” “legislation,” “regulation,” or “white house.” The monthly frequency counts for each paper are scaled by the number of all articles in the same paper and month, and averaged for the overall index.

compiles all federal regulations in effect in a given year. The index rose more than six-fold after 1950, highlighting a tremendous expansion in the extent and complexity of federal regulations. Uncertainty about the existence, meaning, and enforcement of government regulations likely increases with their scale and complexity. The size and complexity of the US tax code also grew dramatically in recent decades, as discussed in Joint Committee on Taxation (2001) and National Taxpayer Advocate (2012).

In summary, secular growth in government spending and taxes relative to GDP and the greater scale and complexity of both government regulations and the tax code are likely contributors to the rise in policy-related economic uncertainty. The payoffs associated with private economic decisions are increasingly affected by government activities and policies that are subject to change. Of course, an expanded role for government could bring benefits that outweigh the costs, and a greater role for government could lower overall economic uncertainty even as it raises policy-related uncertainty. For example, an expansive tax-funded social safety net serves as an automatic fiscal stabilizer that dampens fluctuations in output and employment. Moreover, many financial regulations seek to reduce uncertainty associated with financial crises and their spillovers to the rest of the economy. Nevertheless, Figure 1 suggests that the secular growth in government is one reason for rising policy uncertainty.²

III. Political Polarization and Policy Uncertainty

Another class of explanations for rising policy uncertainty stresses the potential for political polarization to produce more extreme policies, less policy stability, and less capacity of policy makers to address pressing problems. In recent years, American politics appears at odds with the classic model of two-party electoral competition. Rather than converging on preferences of the

median voter, the economic policy positions of the parties' most prominent figures have diverged sharply. At the same time, partisan control of Congress has switched frequently, and presidential elections have been competitive. Thus, national elections often produce spikes in policy uncertainty, especially around close presidential contests (e.g., Canes-Wrone and Park 2012 and Baker, Bloom, and Davis 2013).

Even amidst partisan rancor, investors in the US economy traditionally take solace in the extensive checks and balances embedded in the US Constitution. Divided government, Senate obstructionism, and opposition from co-partisan legislators often derail presidential policy initiatives. In recent years, however, these sources of status quo bias often reinforced rather than reduced policy uncertainty. The status quo is unattractive when the debt ceiling must be raised to avoid default, or fiscal adjustment is required for a sustainable debt path. Yet change from the status quo under American-style separation of powers typically requires the agreement of both parties, creating tensions that can lead to high-stakes bargaining scenarios in which political incentives for brinkmanship create high levels of uncertainty.

Political polarization can also increase policy uncertainty in more subtle ways. Presidents of both parties have increasingly politicized the bureaucracy by appointing partisan loyalists and shifting key policy decisions to White House operatives not subject to Senate confirmation (e.g., Moe 1985). In contrast to the early post-war period, when appointed regulators held the upper hand vis-à-vis political appointees, the policy environment is now more prone to rapid swings between an aggressive regulatory stance and a more hands-off approach. The tendency toward rapid switching of regulatory regimes intensifies when presidents respond to legislative gridlock by implementing policy agendas through executive orders and other forms of "unilateral action" (e.g., Howell 2003). Because successor presidents can readily reverse unilateral executive actions, the effect is to increase long-term policy uncertainty.

A. Polarization of Voters and Districts?

The most popular measure of Congressional polarization is based on the NOMINATE scores of Poole and Rosenthal (1985), which estimate the ideological locations of legislators based on

² The online Appendix shows that newspaper-based indexes of sectoral economic uncertainty (for agriculture, manufacturing and finance, insurance and real-estate) vary with sectoral shares of aggregate output. This pattern indicates that larger sectors typically attract more media coverage about economic uncertainty, supporting the view that the growth in government leads to more concern about government-related economic uncertainty.

their roll call voting behavior. As displayed in Figure 2, the ideological gap between Democrats and Republicans has been increasing since the 1960s according to this measure. Several alternative Congress-based measures, including ones based on campaign finance records (Bonica forthcoming) and textual analysis of the congressional record (Jensen et al. 2012), also show a pronounced secular increase in the ideological distance between Democratic and Republican legislators and a precipitous decline in moderate legislators.

One potential reason for this increasing polarization of policymakers is the increasing polarization of voters. However, an important puzzle for political scientists is the absence of evidence for a corresponding polarization in the policy preferences of the public during the same period (Fiorina 2010), and relatedly, the growing number of Americans who classify themselves as “independents.” Voter preferences seem to be unipolar—most voters report preferring centrist policies—and this pattern has not changed much over time. The correlation between policy attitudes and voting behavior has increased somewhat, but this “sorting” has taken place almost exclusively on non-economic dimensions of partisan conflict (e.g., Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006). Also, polarization of the economics-oriented content of published party platforms has fluctuated rather than consistently increased. Yet, as shown in Figure 2, voters perceive the parties’ overall platforms to be diverging steadily, a perception that is highly correlated with the newspaper-based EPU index.³

Perhaps the most basic solution to this puzzle lies in the country’s rapidly changing political geography. The Democrats have become the party of the post-industrial urban core and inner suburbs, and the Republicans have become the party of the outer suburbs and rural periphery. Partly as a result, there has been a slow and steady decline in the number of competitive Congressional seats over recent decades. Aggregating presidential votes to the level of Congressional districts, Figure 2 shows that the standard deviation of the Democratic vote share

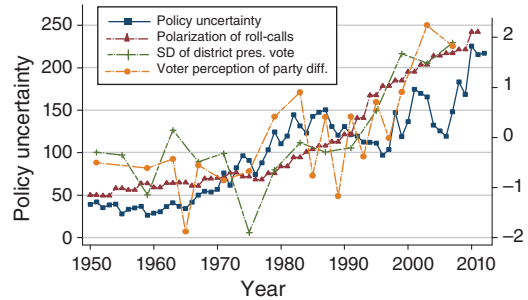


FIGURE 2. US ECONOMIC POLICY UNCERTAINTY AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Notes: US Economic Policy Uncertainty Index from Baker, Bloom, and Davis (2013). Polarization of roll calls from DW-NOMINATE SD from McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2009), of district presidential vote shares from authors’ calculations. Voter perception of party differences calculated from American National Election Study data. All variables except policy uncertainty normalized to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

has increased substantially since the 1980s and is reasonably correlated with the newspaper-based measure of policy uncertainty.

However, the explanation for Congressional polarization cannot lie exclusively in the outward movement of the tails of the distribution of district-level partisanship. The distribution over districts remains unimodal, with a large density of rather evenly divided districts in the middle, while the distribution of roll call votes has become sharply bimodal. Moreover, various analyses indicate that Congressional polarization emerges from the radically different roll call voting behavior of Democratic and Republican representatives from otherwise similar districts, rather than the polarization of districts (e.g., Lee, Moretti, and Butler 2004). Although partisan gerrymandering is frequently cited in the media as a major source of polarization, academic studies fail to find evidence of a causal impact (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2009). McCarty et al. (2013) suggest the large difference in roll call voting behavior between Democrats and Republicans is related to the internal ideological heterogeneity of many suburban and exurban “centrist” districts. Given that voter perceptions of party platforms are driven by highly vocal partisans from the ideologically homogeneous districts in the tails of the distribution, it is difficult for candidates in heterogeneous centrist districts to credibly position themselves

³ The American National Election Study has maintained a consistent question asking respondents if they see any important differences between the major parties. From each survey we display the percent of all respondents who answer in the affirmative.

as moderates. Rather, they opt for a strategy of mobilizing core supporters who are more likely to turn out, especially in primary elections. The growing availability of household-level data for use in micro-targeted campaign materials only enhances the appeal of this strategy.

Two other factors frequently mentioned as explanations for rising political polarization are rising media polarization and rising income inequality. While media polarization does not appear to have directly polarized voters or districts, this phenomenon has perhaps encouraged politicians to cater to core supporters rather than independents. Research finds that the direct link between partisan media and political polarization is weak. Polarization began more than a decade before the advent of Fox News and MSNBC, political views have been relatively constant, and notably, most voters either avoid partisan news altogether or select an ideological spectrum of programming (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011). At the same time, however, cable TV itself may have contributed to polarization by letting viewers choose entertainment over news, thereby decreasing politicians' exposure to fewer partisan voters and incentivizing their focus on politically active partisans (Prior 2013).

Likewise, rising income inequality could facilitate legislative polarization in a number of ways, even if mass opinion has not polarized. One possibility is that greater income inequality raises the political stakes for the rich as they realize the median voter has more to gain from redistributive policies. A related argument is that politicians are more responsive to rich than poor voters (e.g., Gilens 2012). Thus, as the right tail of the income distribution pulls outward, the right-leaning party shifts away from centrist policies.

B. Institutional Dynamics

When discussing political polarization, media pundits and reformers often stress institutional factors that might be amenable to change, such as campaign finance and the structure of primary elections. One claim is that low-turnout primary elections are an important factor in the rise of polarization. Anecdotal evidence suggests that incumbents now avoid casting bipartisan votes that would have been uncontroversial in the 1970s, because they fear inducing a well-funded primary challenger. Incumbent candidates certainly face primary threats, and these

threats may influence roll call voting incentives. However, most states introduced congressional primaries before the rise in polarization, and even in states that adopted primaries more recently, electoral reform is not associated with increased within-state polarization (Hirano et al. 2010).

A more significant change to elections and campaigns since the 1970s involves campaign finance. In particular, individual donors have replaced political action committees (PACs) as the most important source of campaign finance. While PACs tend to be ideologically moderate and flexible, individual donors tend to be more extreme and rigid. Barber (2013) links these developments to polarization; when states increase individual donor limits, state-level legislative polarization increases.

IV. Conclusion

As the reach of government has expanded, the rhetoric of the major parties has become more polarized, and legislators have found fewer incentives to cast the bipartisan votes needed to solve basic problems in a political system with divided powers. These trends closely track a secular increase in policy-related economic uncertainty. We hope this paper serves to introduce a nascent research agenda aimed at explaining the interplay of uncertainty, polarization, and government growth. The next step in this agenda is a focus on causality, which will require investment in cross-state and cross-national analysis as well as historical research.

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