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Winner-Take-All Politics is an ambitious and worthy addition to the growing literature focusing on the connection between politics and economic inequality in the United States. Covering much of the same ground and reaching many of the same conclusions as Larry Bartels's recent *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age,* Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson's volume is distinctive in its broad historical and theoretical approach and its accessibility for an intelligent but nonacademic audience.[1] Precisely because it is written in a lively and accessible style, it may even become part of the discussion and debate about taxes, debt, and deficits now occurring in the halls of our nation's capital as well as state capitals across the country. At least one can hope so.

Putting recent experience in historical perspective, Hacker and Pierson search out the roots of America's continuing and often ambivalent struggle with economic inequality, centered on the question of whether gross differences in individual economic conditions should be considered a cause for concern or just a by-product of a vibrant capitalist market economy. Even if economic inequality is considered undesirable, this in itself does not necessarily justify a role for government to play in reducing economic differences, providing services, and assisting the disadvantaged. Unlike other rich capitalist democracies and despite periods of real progressive reform, America has never reached a consensus on these fundamental questions, and so the debate and ensuing struggle continue.

Hacker and Pierson make a compelling case that the growing economic inequality seen in the United States during the past few decades is not due primarily to economic, technological, or sociological factors. Foreign trade, globalization, technological advances, and substantial increases in formal education all play but a minor role in fostering the increasing economic inequality, according to the authors. They assign the leading role to politics, in particular, a series of crucial but largely overlooked political decisions and government policies that, beginning in the late 1970s, greatly benefited Wall Street, big corporations, and wealthy individuals while overlooking the interests of working- and middle-class Americans who were increasingly forced to fend for themselves. Seen from this vantage point, the recent political attacks on public employee unions represent just the latest chapter in this ongoing saga.

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A fundamental puzzle is why public policy has become so tilted toward the very rich in a country committed to representative democracy, operating under near-universal suffrage, and making most decisions based on majority rule. It would almost seem that the preferences of the median voter—a voter of relatively modest means—has given way to the preferences of a small economic elite who now dominate politics as much as they have tended to dominate economics. In any case, *Winner-Take-All Politics* argues that it is our politics that is mostly responsible for our growing economic inequality, and this, in turn, lays the blame directly on our most representative political institution, the Congress, and the most visible and significant actors in our national legislature, the political parties. Hacker and Pierson devote significant attention to an analysis of the policy proposals advocated and often enacted by congressional Democrats and Republicans as they seek to unravel the mystery of how the rich few have gained so much more political influence during recent decades, compared to the modest many.

In the remainder of this brief essay I want to expand and elaborate on the evidence provided by the authors concerning the differences in the ideological orientations between the two congressional parties, differences that are thrown into sharp relief as a result of recent congressional elections, and that serve to reinforce the asymmetrical polarization between parties that was the focus of their earlier book, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy.*[2] In that work, Hacker and Pierson contended not only that the ideological differences between the parties have increased in the past several decades but that the growth in polarization has been asymmetrical or unequal: Democrats have moved modestly to the left while Republicans have moved much more sharply to the right. Evidence consistent with this asymmetrical polarization hypothesis can be gleaned from the results of the five congressional elections contested during the first decade of the twenty-first century.[3]

Congressional Elections and Asymmetrical Polarization: 2001–2010

Table 1 shows the DW-Nominate scores of new and continuing House Republicans and Democrats for each of the 107th through the 111th Congresses, which cover the period from 2001 to 2010.[4] The scores represent the ideological position of members of Congress based on their roll call votes, and they range between −1.0 and 1.0, with higher scores indicating more conservative positions. As the top two panels of the table clearly show, newly elected House Democrats were more conservative than continuing Democrats in each of these Congresses. These differences in ideology make perfect electoral sense given the well-known ideological difference between safe and marginal Democratic House districts. That is, by the 2000 congressional elections, most veteran Democrats tended

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Table 1
DW-Nominate scores for new and continuing House members, 107th–111th Congresses

	107th 2001–2002	108th 2003–2004	109th 2005–2006	110th 2007–2008	111th 2009–2010
New House Democrats	–.358 (15)	–.313 (24)	–.315 (17)	–.294 (50)	–.242 (41)
Continuing House Democrats	–.389 (197)	–.397 (184)	–.407 (185)	–.400 (191)	–.384 (221)
New House Republicans	.556 (36)	.588 (35)	.580 (28)	.653 (17)	.637 (27)
Continuing House Republicans	.506 (192)	.535 (197)	.560 (191)	.587 (189)	.621 (156)

to be concentrated in safer Democratic districts, which also tended to be located in the most liberal districts throughout the country. Newly elected Democrats since 2000, on the other hand, more often came from more marginal districts, which tend to be more ideologically diverse and where more moderate Democrats have a greater chance of success. Thus, it is not surprising that the ideological differences between new and continuing congressional Democrats were highest in the 2006 and 2008 elections, where large numbers of relatively moderate Democrats won in moderate to conservative districts previously held by Republicans. The cumulative effect of successively adding somewhat more moderate new members to the party caucus throughout the last decade has been to dampen the leftward movement of the House Democratic Party.

The electoral logic underlying these results seems clear and compelling: All other things being equal, less ideologically extreme candidates will be more likely to win marginal House seats, especially when those seats are previously held by the other party. This logic, however, seems to be far less applicable to Republicans. In fact, the ideological differences between new and continuing House Republicans are the mirror image of those of House Democrats. As the bottom two panels of Table 1 indicate, in every congressional election between 2000 and 2008, newly elected Republicans were more, not less, conservative than continuing Republicans. In good times and bad times, newly elected Republicans added to the rightward tilt of the party. In other words, even when Republican House candidates were winning in more marginal districts, often districts that were previously held by Democrats, they were doing so with Republican candidates who were more conservative than returning Republicans. The cumulative effect of this process, of course, was to move the congressional GOP continually rightward as the infusion of even more conservative members were added to a party that was already decidedly conservative.

The 2010 Congressional Elections and Asymmetrical Polarization

The results of the 2010 midterm congressional elections represented the largest partisan turnover in congressional seats since 1938. After having had net losses of 30 House seats in 2006 and 24 seats in 2008, the GOP gained a net total of 64 sets in 2010, winning back the House that they had lost only four years earlier. Many of the new Democrats elected to the House in 2006 and 2008 lost their seats, as did some long-term members who had fought off challenges in the past but could not overcome the 2010 Republican wave. As James Campbell reports, "Of the 67 seat pick-ups for Republicans in 2010 (offset by three Democratic pick-ups) 39 (58%) were in districts that had been lost by Republicans in 2006 or 2008 (16 in 2006, 23 in 2008)."[5]

What do the new Republicans look like ideologically, and how do they compare to Republicans already in the chamber? It is, of course, far too early in the new Congress to gain a definitive picture of the new Republican membership. As of mid-April, the 112th Congress had only been in session for about a hundred days. Even this early in the term, however, it is possible to gain some insight into asymmetrical polarization by analyzing House members' ideological positions as revealed in roll call votes they have taken during the first three months of the new Congress.[6]

The ideological mean score for the newly elected Republican members of the House is .728, compared to a mean score of .662 for continuing Republicans. The difference is statistically significant and follows the same pattern observed throughout the earlier decade, with new Republican members of the House being consistently more conservative then returning Republicans. This finding can be interpreted from two perspectives. On the one hand, since most of the new House Republicans won in moderate to conservative districts previously held by Democrats in 2006 or 2008, it makes sense that conservative Republicans could win in these districts. But the degree of their conservatism is more surprising. After all, most of these new Republicans won seats that were held by Democrats in one of the two previous election cycles. So why should they be more conservative than continuing members of their party's caucus, most of whom had withstood the two Democratic wave elections of 2006 and 2008 and probably represent the most conservative districts throughout the country?

The asymmetric ideological polarization of the congressional parties, which, as we have shown, has been fueled since 2000 by the successive election of less liberal

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Democrats coupled with more conservative Republicans, is only one aspect of the more comprehensive account provided in *Winner-Take-All Politics* about how changes in American politics during the past several decades have been a major generator of increasing economic inequality. But it is an essential part of the story nonetheless. Just as Congress has enacted the government policies that have contributed to growing economic inequality, so have the ideological changes in the congressional membership made these policies possible.

Notes

1 Bartels 2008.
2 Hacker and Pierson 2006.
3 Sean Theriault 2008 (p. 41) argues that "[a]ny explanation [of congressional ideological polarization] must take into account both the growing ideological voting of incumbents and the replacement of more moderate members by more ideological members." I fully agree, but in this commentary, I am calling attention to the ideological differences in member replacement between the parties that have occurred since 2000.
4 I do not focus on the Senate in this commentary, but it should be noted that the pattern we observe in the House of Representatives since 2000 in which new House Democrats are less liberal than continuing Democrats while new Republicans are more conservative than continuing Republicans is generally the same pattern we observe in the Senate, with one exception. In the 111th Congress as a group, the five new Republican senators are actually less conservative than the 39 continuing Republican senators. These data for both the Senate and House come from Keith Poole's Website. (see: ⟨http://www.voteview.com/dwnomin.htm⟩, accessed 12 July 2011).
5 Campbell 2010, 7.
6 The 260 recorded roll call votes analyzed here were cast from the beginning of the 112th Congress in early January until April 14, 2011 and were downloaded from Jeffrey Lewis's Website, which is continually updated (see: ⟨http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/lewis/#a_data⟩, accessed 12 July 2011). The scores were calculated using Simon Jackman's IDEAL estimation program, and though not identical to DW-Nominate scores, the two correlate very highly. For a comparison of the two methods of fitting spatial models to binary roll call data, see Carroll et al. 2009 and Clinton and Jackman 2009. For an exposition of the estimation procedures underlying DW-Nominate scores, see Poole and Rosenthal 1997, and for IDEAL ideology scores, see Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004.

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