

Lawrence C. Dodd and Scot Schraufnagel

Abstract:

The ability of Congress to act in a productive manner, we argue, depends not only on how polarized parties are in Congress, but on the extent to which members of Congress are constrained by norms of civility. Legislative productivity is low, we argue, when party polarization is low, particularly if norms of civility are so strong that members are unable to pursue activist agendas in either party, as was the case at times in the mid-20th century. Likewise, productivity is low when party polarization is high, particularly if norms of civility are so weak that uncivil behavior between parties inhibits compromise, as seen in the early 20th century and again in recent times.

Productivity is likely to be high in Congress amid moderate levels of political conflict, with moderate conflict dependent on the existence of moderate levels of party polarization and member adherence to norms of behavior that help reinforce moderate interparty conflict. Such moderate levels of conflict were seen, in particular, in the 1930s, 1960s and 1970s.

To test this thesis, we have collected original data on member incivility across more than a century of behavior and combined this data with roll call data on party polarization in Congress. Our initial empirical tests provide strong support for these arguments. In doing so, these results indicate that students of Congress need to devote attention not just to conditions that foster low, moderate and high party polarization but also the study of member adherence to civil behavior in Congress.

To aid in stimulating such research, the study concludes by presenting some preliminary empirical evidence on factors that can foster different levels and forms of uncivil action.

Academic Biography:

Lawrence C. Dodd holds the Manning J. Dauer Eminent Scholar Chair in Political Science at the University of Florida. He received his Ph. D. from the University of Minnesota in 1972. He has served as a Congressional Fellow (1974-75), Hoover National Fellow (1984-85) and Woodrow Wilson Center Fellow (2003-2004). His most recent book is *Thinking about Congress* (London: Routledge Press, 2012). The University of Florida selected Dodd as 2007 Teacher-Scholar of the Year, its highest faculty honor.