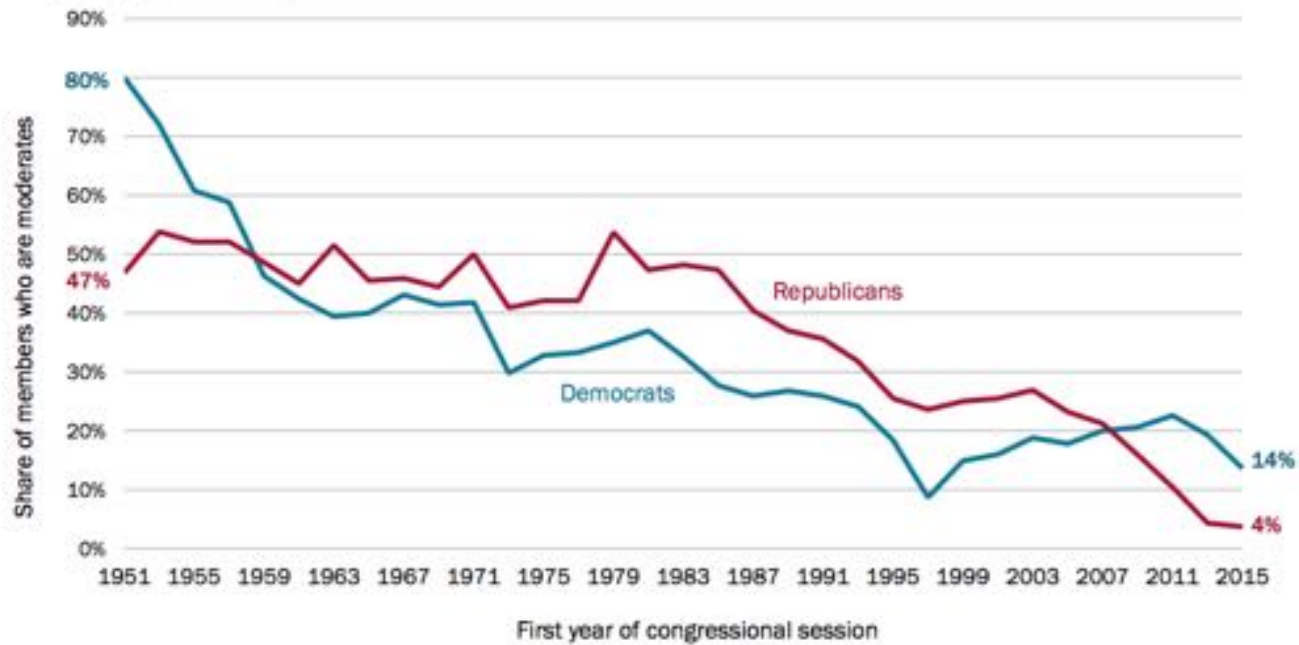


A DISAPPEARING BREED: THE CONGRESSIONAL CENTERIST

As the current political climate becomes ever more partisan, the most moderate members are leaving both the Senate and Congress. The following two charts track the declining proportion of moderates in both houses thru 2015. In 2016 – 2017 we have seen an acceleration of this trend – especially the high number of Republicans who are choosing not to run for reelection.

FIGURE 3: DECLINING PROPORTION OF MODERATES IN THE SENATE

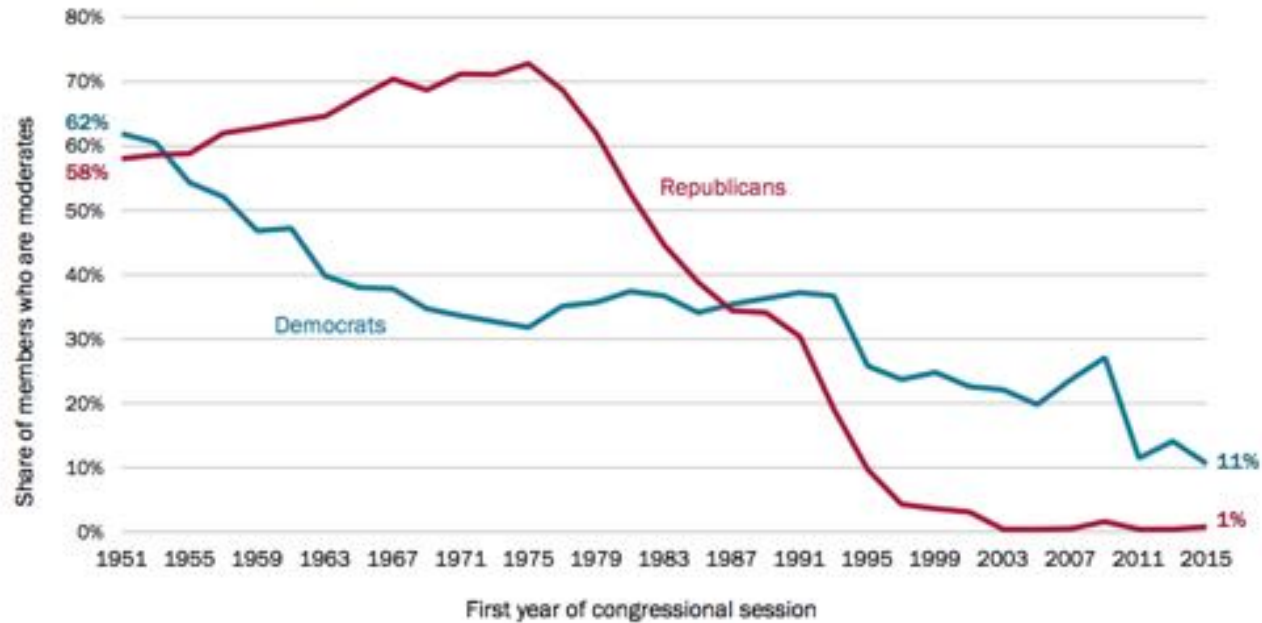
As of the 114th Congress (starting 2015), 14% of Democrats and 4% of Republicans in the Senate are moderates. In 1951, roughly 50% of Republicans and 80% of Democrats were moderates.



The decline of moderates in the House follows a similar trend as the Senate.

FIGURE 4: DECLINING PROPORTION OF MODERATES IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

As of the 114th Congress (starting 2015), 11% of Democrats and 1% of Republicans in the House are moderates. In 1951, roughly 60% of both Republicans and Democrats in the House were moderates.



Case Example: Democratic Congressman Jason Altmire

Jason Altmire served three terms (2007 – 2012) representing Pennsylvania’s 4th District. As a centrist Democrat, he was defeated in the 2012 Democratic primary by the more partisan Mark Critz, who then went on to lose the seat in the general election to Republican Keith Rothfus.

The following excerpt is taken from Altmire’s book, DEAD CENTER, How Political Polarization Divided America and What We Can Do About it.

My time in the house showed me how difficult it is to be a centrist in Congress. At home, you win the respect of thoughtful moderates more interested in making progress than scoring political points. In Washington, you draw the ire of partisans on both sides. In primaries, you find yourself fighting for survival against activists who are outside of the mainstream and don't understand the first thing about how to win a swing district in the general election.

You spend hours every day raising money – making hundreds of phone calls per week and attending countless fundraisers. You watch every word you say to avoid ending up the centerpiece of a campaign ad or a viral social media post that could be targeted to voters of either party.

At any time, you are in danger of being targeted by a Super PAC or other outside group that can come into the district and airdrop millions of dollars worth of negative ads based upon a skewed interpretation of one of the thousands of votes you cast. You are pressured by party leaders to take votes you know are not representative of the district you were elected to serve.

Through it all, you work hard to build friendships with colleagues on both sides of the aisle, trying to solidify working coalitions in order to achieve the bipartisan compromise so elusive in Congress today. You meet with constituents to learn their issues and generate new ideas, some of which you turn into legislation.

Regardless of party affiliation, you help constituents with their casework concerns, ranging from VA benefits to adopting foreign babies to student loans to Social Security to emergency passport renewals,

just to name a few. In casting votes, you do the best you can to strike the balance between representing the district and following your own compass.

One of the things you don't do much as a centrist is polarize. There is no time for that. You also don't spend much time thinking about how to make the other side look bad, because if you want to be successful, you have to work with members of both parties.

Unlike those representing safely gerrymandered seats, members from swing districts hear both sides of an issue and have to consider multiple levels of information before deciding how to vote. Most partisans in Congress have the luxury of just voting the way their leadership wants them to. Not so for the centrists.