

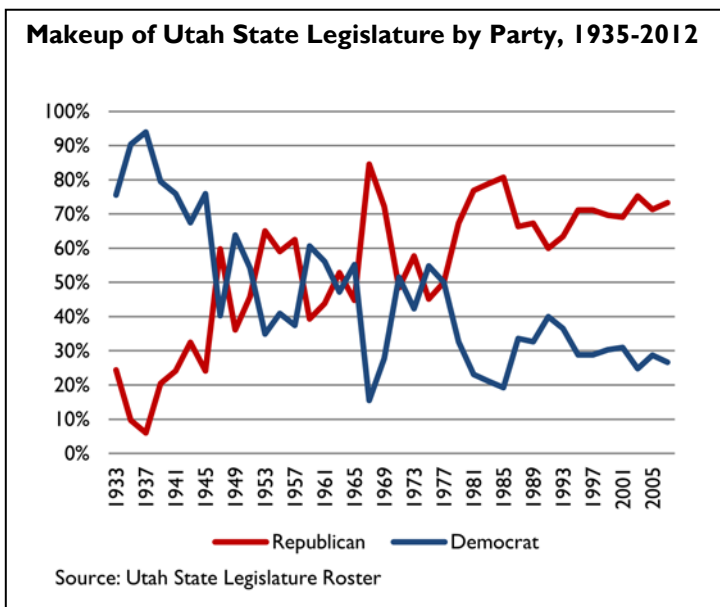
**PRIORITY ISSUE #8: PARTISAN POLITICS**

*Each gubernatorial election year since 2004, Utah Foundation organizes the Utah Priorities Project in partnership with the Hinckley Institute of Politics. The project is designed to engage the public and political candidates in serious dialogue on the most important issues facing our state. It begins with survey work that establishes what voters view as the top ten issues for the election year. This month, Utah Foundation releases a series of policy briefs of each of the top ten issues. In 2012, voters listed partisan politics as the 8<sup>th</sup> most important priority in the election year.*

**Partisanship**

In the 2012 Utah Priorities Survey, 52% of respondents reported that they were concerned or very concerned about partisan politics. This included 57% of Democrats, 52% of independent voters, and 39% of Republicans.<sup>1</sup> The difference of 18 percentage points between the two major parties reveals there is a level of partisanship even with the issue of partisanship itself.

At the national level, partisan politics is at a record high. Polarization between the two major parties in Congress is currently at its highest level since the end of Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there has been a steady decrease in the number of moderates in Congress since 1939. Currently, the number of moderates in both chambers of the U.S. Congress is at a historic low.



Utah Republicans' lower level of concern about partisan politics may be due to their party's success nationally in the 2010 midterm election, as well as their party's enduring control of Utah's legislative and executive branches, and its congressional delegation. Utah Democrats' higher level of concern may be due in part to the state's recent redistricting process, as well as their party's lower level of representation within the Utah State Legislature and congressional delegation.

Political polarization can also be measured by party dominance in the Utah State Legislature. Utah has seen swings in party dominance over the past century, but the Republican Party has held strong majorities in both houses of the Utah State Legislature since 1979. The current Republican majority of 77% is near record levels.

The level of concern by all respondents may also be related to the amount of partisan rhetoric in national

politics. This was especially visible with the Republican presidential primaries, the recent national party conventions, and their media coverage. Another factor may have been the historic 2011 downgrade of the national credit rating by S&P. The downgrade was attributed in part to the level of partisanship in Washington, D.C. – or “political brinkmanship” – resulting in the inability of policymakers to substantively address the nation's fiscal issues.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, the increase in partisanship was displayed through widespread discontent embodied by the rise of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements in the past several years. These movements seem to exhibit a desire to move away from the political center, and to the extent they succeed in influencing elections, the result could be greater partisan divides.

**Voter Turnout**

While Utah's voter turnout once was well above the national average, it is now the ninth lowest among the states and the District of Columbia. In the 1970s, around 70% of Utah's voting-age population voted. By 1988 turnout had dropped to 62%. While recovering to 67% in 1992, it dropped to 52% in 1996, remaining in the low- to mid-50% range until

reaching a four-decade low of 50% in 2008. Conversely, the national turnout rate has been much more stable. Though it did decrease slightly in the 1980s, the 2008 turnout of 57% was just above the turnout of 55% in 1972.<sup>4</sup>

## The Calculus of Voting

There are several important measures which can influence whether a person votes: their perception of whether their vote counts, gratification or duty related to voting, and the “costs” involved in voting.<sup>5</sup>

### *Voter Perceptions and Close Races*

Utah’s voter turnout was high in the 1970s, when more political races seemed competitive. As more of these races became uncontested or were won by very large margins of victory, the trend in voter turnout was falling. The level of uncompetitive races reached a peak in 1996, coinciding with the largest drop in voter turnout during this period.

### *Gratification and Duty*

Political science and behavioral research has shown that there is positive correlation between volunteering and political participation.<sup>6</sup> While Utah has led the nation in volunteerism, this does not translate to a high level of voter participation. Utah’s high rate of volunteering and its connection to a religious institution may indicate that religious affiliation promotes civic engagement and perhaps should encourage political engagement as well. However, the link between volunteering and political engagement does not seem evident in Utah.

### *The Cost of Voting*

Utah’s voting rules and the access to information may increase voting costs, and potentially affect voter turnout. Utah requires voter registration forms be postmarked 30 days prior to an election, as opposed to states that allow election-day registration. Utah does however allow voter registration online ([www.vote.utah.gov](http://www.vote.utah.gov)) or in person 15 days before an election. Utah’s closed Republican primary presents another restriction to voter turnout, as it limits the participation of independent voters and Democrats in many of the candidate selection processes that have the most impact. The caucus-convention system also adds another complication, requiring voters not just to understand an additional layer of the electoral process, but to be aware of changing caucus and convention dates and locations.

## Conclusion

The level of party polarization and partisan politics has risen to historic levels, and has become a top concern for Utah voters. However, the intensity of this partisanship in Utah may have peaked in 2010, as exemplified by the ousting of then-Senator Bennett in the Republican convention by conservative forces, including the Tea Party. Recent opinion polls show that support for the Tea Party is waning, even among Republicans and Republican state delegates in Utah. The percentage of Republican and Democratic state delegates who identified as moderate also increased from 2010 to 2012.<sup>7</sup> In the overall voting population, those who identify as moderate declined in 2012.<sup>8</sup> Whether this trend continues is yet to be seen, but it will be interesting to see whether it has an effect on Utahns’ perceptions of partisan politics and on their voter turnout rates.

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<sup>1</sup> Utah Foundation Report 706, “The 2012 Utah Priorities Survey: The Top Issues and Concerns of Utah Voters for the 2012 Election,” March 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Nolan McCarthy, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, [www.voteview.com](http://www.voteview.com)

<sup>3</sup> Standard and Poors, “United States of America Long-Term Rating Lowered To 'AA+' Due To Political Risks, Rising Debt Burden; Outlook Negative,” August 2011. Available at: <http://www.standardandpoors.com/ratings/articles/en/us/?assetID=1245316529563>

<sup>4</sup> George Mason University, United States Elections Project; Utah Lt. Governors Office.

<sup>5</sup> Downs, Anthony “An Economic Theory of Democracy” New York, Harper & Row, 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Gray, M., Ondaatje, E., Fricker, R., Geschwind, S., Goldman, C., Kaganoff, T., Robyn, A., Sundt, M., Vogelgesang, L., & Klein, S. “Combining service and learning in higher education: Evaluation of the Learn and Serve America, Higher Education Program.” Santa Monica, CA: Rand Education, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Utah Foundation Report 708, “2012 Utah Priorities Survey of Party Delegates and Voters,” April 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Utah Foundation Report 706, “The 2012 Utah Priorities Survey: The Top Issues and Concerns of Utah Voters for the 2012 Election,” March 2012.