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Political Polarization—a Dispatch from the Scholarly Front Lines

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Brookings Institution, in collaboration with Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, set out to understand the causes and consequences of polarization in America’s body politic. In March 2006, Brookings’s Governance Studies Program hosted a conference in which scholars presented their papers. These papers are gathered in the first of two conference volumes—*Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics*, edited by Red and Blue Nation? Project co-directors Pietro S. Nivola, Brookings vice president and director of Governance Studies, and David W. Brady, deputy director and senior fellow at Hoover. The project was made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. A second volume, to be published in November 2007, will explore the electoral, institutional and social remedies for political polarization.



This special edition of the *Issues in Governance Studies* papers summarizes the major contributions to the first volume. The topics addressed include an exploration of whether polarization afflicts only the members of the political classes or whether it also divides ordinary voters; whether today’s polarization is significant relative to other periods in history; whether religion, mass media and electoral factors such as gerrymandering are engines of polarization; and, finally, the degree to which, if at all, polarization lessens the quality of political discourse or weakens the policymaking process.

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Are We Really Polarized?

Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential campaign initiated what some observers have identified as a period of increasing differentiation between the two major political parties. In subsequent years, as party leaders staked out increasingly distinct, if not completely polar, positions on issues such as taxation, abortion and national defense, the parties sent clear signals to liberal and conservative voters as to which party better represented their ideological leanings. By the 1990s and into the 2000s, the rancor and ill will that existed between the parties' elites in Washington was taken to be symptomatic of a similar divide occurring in the American public.

But is the polarization of the political class—the politicians, the people who work for them, and the people who bankroll their campaigns—a true reflection of what is happening in the electorate? In examining the anatomy of a supposedly polarized America, political scientists Morris P. Fiorina of Hoover and Matthew S. Levendusky, now a post-doctorate fellow at Yale University, find that the battles being waged between liberals and conservatives in Washington are not being waged—at least not with the same intensity and fervor—by rank-and-file voters. “The result,” they write, “is a disconnect between the American people and those who purport to represent them... American politics today finds a polarized political class competing for the support of a much less polarized electorate.”

A polarized public implies that voters in the aggregate have abandoned their moderate, centrist positions in favor of more extremely liberal or conservative ones. In the words of Fiorina and Levendusky, “the middle ground literally vanishes.” But quantitative and qualitative studies have shown that this has not happened to any appreciable degree—and that the electorates of the 1990s and early 2000s “held a mix of the traditional and modern views that were supposedly at war.”

What *has* happened is party sorting, the process by which voters have aligned themselves with the party that better represents their ideological temperament. According to Fiorina and Levendusky, “as recently as the 1970s, liberals and conservatives could each find a comfortable home in either the Democratic or the Republican Party. But nowadays the Republican Party is much more likely to be the home of ideologically conservative voters, while the Democratic Party is home to most liberals. The relative numbers of conservatives and liberals may not have changed all that much, but their party affiliation certainly has.”

Even on hot-button issues such as abortion and gay marriage, Fiorina and Levendusky find that the public is often far less divided than the political elites. For instance, citing 2004 National Election Study data on the abortion issue, Fiorina and Levendusky observe that more than 40 percent of “strong Democrats” and “strong Republicans” favored some form of middle ground on the issue to the unequivocally pro- or anti-abortion stances taken by party elites. In other words, Democratic and Republican voters were far less unified—and far more moderate—on the issue than the political class.



Richard Walker is the managing editor of *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics* (Brookings, December 2006).

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If the polarization of America's political class is not a direct reflection of a similar division in the public, as traditional theories of political representation would suggest, what accounts for it? Fiorina and Levendusky suggest that the most likely factor is the role of primary elections in the American electoral process. (This issue is also taken up by Thomas E. Mann of Brookings in his chapter on the role of gerrymandering.) Turnout in primary elections is frequently very low, and those who do turn out are often the most ideologically extreme members of each party. Candidates, even those not facing a serious primary challenge, are likely to court the support of such voters by adopting more noncentrist positions. The result is a Congress that more closely reflects the wider divisions of political elites than the much narrower divisions of the public.

Polarization Then and Now

David W. Brady and Hahrie C. Han, professor of political science at Wellesley College, point to an irony in the debate about political polarization "because the primary function of political parties is, by definition, to organize differences between factions in the political system. ... In some sense, political parties exist in order to be polarized." Indeed, Brady and Han remind us that "polarization in American politics is nothing new" and that the country's "political institutions and policymaking processes have withstood sharp divisions between the parties."


Brady and Han examine three crisis periods in American history—the Civil War, the industrial revolution, and the New Deal—as benchmarks against which to compare today's polarization. They attempt to measure key dimensions of a given era's polarization, including its breadth (the degree of ideological separation between the parties) and its depth (the pervasiveness of polarization throughout the political system), as well as the "character" and "intensity" of the issues dividing the parties.

Brady and Han look to the Civil War era as a benchmark for total polarization. The political parties were not only widely separated ideologically but were highly unified around their respective positions, and the public seems to have been equally polarized. Before 1852, as Brady and Han point out, the Republican Party was virtually nonexistent. By 1860, rewarded by northern voters for its anti-slavery positions, the Republican Party controlled the Congress and occupied the White House. Following the Republican ascendancy, southern politicians and voters reacted by rapidly seceding from the Union. Thus, polarization during the Civil War era was both extremely broad and extremely deep.

The issues that divided the country during the Civil War era—slavery, secession, and civil rights—were "characterized by intense moral fervor." Because moral issues (slavery then, abortion now) produce divisions in which both sides are convinced that only they are right, it is difficult, according to Brady and Han, "to achieve collective action around a compromise." When the anti-slavery North split irreconcilably with the pro-slavery South, the result was a ruinous four-year civil war rather than political compromise.

More useful benchmarks, however, are found in the two other crisis periods





examined by Brady and Han: the period of industrial transformation at the turn of the 20th century and the New Deal era of the 1930s. In the 1890s and early 1900s, the political parties polarized over whether government should facilitate the growth of the urban, industrial economy or protect the shrinking rural, agrarian economy. The parties also divided over what role the burgeoning country should play on the international stage. During the 1930s, the parties again polarized over the role of government, this time regarding the proper use of economic policy to lift the country out of the Great Depression. Yet in neither period did the degree of polarization threaten to result in a Civil War-like schism. Because the issues that polarized the 1890s and 1930s were ultimately resolved, these eras may suggest ways in which today's divisive issues will be resolved—and how long it may take.

Through their examination of congressional voting records and other historical evidence, Brady and Han find that the present era more closely resembles the period of the 1890s in that both economic and moral issues divide the parties. During the New Deal era, the parties polarized around a single economic issue: how government should respond to the economic depression to get the country back on the track to prosperity. Both parties agreed on the desirability of the goal, but differed widely on how to achieve it. As Republicans and Democrats strove for unity around their respective positions, moral issues pertaining to race and civil rights were largely ignored. In the 1890s, however, moral debates about Progressivism, Darwinism, urbanization, and U.S. expansionism overseas shared the political stage with contentious economic issues such as tariffs and the gold standard. Brady and Han draw a parallel between this mixture of economic and moral issues and the debates today about economic outsourcing, taxation, free trade agreements, abortion, gay marriage, and stem-cell research.

The polarization of both the 1890s and 1930s was resolved through what Brady and Han call “a series of electoral shifts.” From 1896 to 1908, Republicans dominated Democrats in congressional and presidential elections. After 1908, however, the Populist faction that had led the Democratic Party through loss after loss began to fade, and as the party altered its positions on key issues, it gradually regained its competitiveness. Similarly, New Deal-era Republicans, after enduring a series of defeats in the 1930s and 1940s, only became competitive again after accepting the broad outlines of the New Deal. Brady and Han suggest that today's polarization may only be resolved through a similar series of electoral defeats and shifts. But the mix of moral and economic issues on the partisan agendas may make today's polarization, like that of the 1890s, more intractable—and a resolution of partisan differences may occur incrementally.

Engines of Polarization

Polarized by God?

Did religious voters decide the 2004 election? In his chapter, E.J. Dionne Jr., senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings, finds that religion did play an important role in



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determining how people voted in 2004, but so did the “traditional drivers of political choice—class, race, region, economic circumstances, and views on foreign policy and on government’s role at home.” Religion is unquestionably a major source of political polarization in today’s electorate, but it is one among many.

According to data from the 2004 exit polls, the most ardently religious voters (those who attended church services more than once a week) opted for Bush by a margin of 64 percent to 35 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, those who never attended church services voted for Kerry 62 percent to 36 percent. These data were widely interpreted as evidence that the 2004 election was a triumph of the religious voter over the secular voter. Dionne, however, points out that Americans at the far ends of the religious spectrum, taken together, accounted for only about three in ten votes cast in the 2004 presidential election. Among the remaining voters, there was a definite relationship between frequency of church attendance and voting, but the relationship was not as strong as among the most and least religious voters. “Some of the passion underlying the nation’s current political polarization is religious passion,” but other passions also roil American politics.

Dionne points out that the 2004 exit polls show that black voters supported Kerry by a margin of 88 percent to 11 percent. Bush carried 56 percent of voters in households with annual incomes of more than \$50,000 (and 63 percent of voters with a household income of more than \$200,000), while Kerry carried 55 percent of the vote in households with annual incomes of less than \$50,000. Even Kerry’s strong showing among voters with postgraduate-level educations (he carried this group 55 percent to 44 percent) is tempered by the fact that Bush narrowly carried postgraduates whose household incomes exceeded \$100,000. Comparing the 2000 and 2004 exit poll data, Dionne finds that as many as 10 percent of Al Gore’s voters cast their ballots for Bush in 2004, a switch he attributes to the impact of the war on terror.

Dionne concludes that Bush won reelection “not because religious conservatives were on the march, not because there is a right-wing majority in the United States, but because the president persuaded just enough of the nonconservative majority to go his way.” In the 2004 electorate, only 34 percent considered themselves to be conservative. To win, the president needed to sway a significant number of moderate voters. Thus did moderates, even in a polarized age, decide the election of 2004.

But even if religious voters haven’t hijacked American politics, religion continues to play a prominent role in American elections—and in different ways than in the past when, for instance, Protestants were reliably Republican and Catholics were staunchly Democrat. Dionne draws on the analyses of political scientist John C. Green to show that in 2004, both Democrats and Republicans were swing groups, reflecting a new reality in which “splits between denominations have now been replaced by splits within denominations—liberal Catholics, Protestants, and Jews ally against conservative Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.”

If there is hope of moderating the polarization fueled by religion in today’s politics, according to Dionne, it rests on Democrats finding ways to reduce the extraordinary



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advantage Republicans have with traditionalist evangelicals, mainline Protestants and traditionalist Catholics. On the other hand, Republicans may find ways of wooing secular voters. “A reaction to the culture wars of the 1960s helped create our current religious divide,” Dionne writes. “A reaction to today’s sharp polarization may well lead to a rendezvous with moderation and a healing of the religious breach.”

Mass Media – Peddling Polarization?

In the three and a half decades since 1970, when most Americans got their political information from the evening news and the local newspaper, the media landscape has been transformed by cable and satellite television, the Internet, cell phones, satellite radio, and iPods. The result, according to Diana C. Mutz, professor of political science and communications at the University of Pennsylvania, is that Americans not only have more sources from which to get their news than ever before, they have more opportunities for tuning the news out altogether. In her chapter in *Red and Blue Nation?*, Mutz explores how these technological developments—along with changes in the content of news programming—have caused mass media to come to be regarded by many as “engines of polarization.”

One theory cited by Mutz links media choice and polarization through the mechanism of selective exposure, in which media consumers choose only those news sources that “reinforce and intensify their preexisting views.” A second theory links mass media to polarization based on consumers choosing not to consume news at all. As less politically interested, more moderate citizens abandon news for entertainment programming, they disengage from learning about issues that might motivate them to take part in the political process. As a result, “more moderate voters are less likely to vote than before, while ... the electorate that does go to the polls is more polarized in its views.”

In addition to these technology-driven changes, Mutz identifies several changes in the content of news programming that could plausibly lead to greater political polarization. Since the 1960s, coverage of elections and campaigns has increasingly focused on the “suspense and speculation about likely winners and losers” and behind-the-scenes strategizing instead of substantive policy differences between the candidates. As a result, “it is a much more polarizing experience to think that one’s candidate lost an election because of a minor misstatement, a failure to look good on television ... than to think that he lost because his policy ideas were less popular than his opponents.” Additionally, journalists, in relying on a more polarized group of political elites as official sources, are presenting “a wider range of acceptable views to the public and thus discouraging consensus.”

Finally, Mutz points out an irony in the popularity of the “televised incivility” displayed on political talk shows such as *The O’Reilly Factor*, *Hardball*, and *Hannity & Colmes*. Research indicates that after watching candidates engage in uncivil exchanges, partisan viewers’ “attitudes toward the ‘other side’ became much more intensely

negative. ... The more dramatic, uncivil exchanges encouraged a more black-and-white view of the world." Yet it is precisely the drama and excitement of these shows that viewers like. Without that, they may be disinclined to watch at all and "thus fall out of the reach of political information altogether."

The key issue for Mutz, then, is "how to make a topic that is not inherently interesting to many Americans nonetheless exciting to watch. And if the answer is not behind-the-scenes coverage of election strategy, or mudslinging on political talk shows, or partisan extremists rallying the troops, then what will keep those politically marginal citizens from watching movies on cable instead?" The alternative is a public that is less knowledgeable of—and less concerned with—political issues and more willing to leave voting to polarized political junkies.

Gerrymandering – Institutional Polarization?

An oft-cited explanation for the climate of hostility between Democrats and Republicans in Washington is that gerrymandering—the political manipulation of legislative boundaries for partisan advantage or to protect incumbents—has helped to fill the Congress with politicians who operate at the ideological poles of their parties.

According to this story, gerrymandering leads to a loss of competitiveness in congressional districts, which in turn fuels political polarization. Skillfully redrawn districts produce safe districts for incumbents who, faced with no significant challengers, have few incentives to accommodate the views of the opposition. Alternatively, the line-drawing process creates districts in which the voters of one party form an overwhelming majority, with the result that candidates worry more about the party primary (whose electorate is often skewed to the party's ideological pole) than the general election. But is gerrymandering really a root cause of today's political polarization? This question is taken up by Brookings senior fellow Thomas E. Mann.

Despite the plausibility of a link between gerrymandering and polarization, Mann finds persuasive evidence that redistricting has played no more than a minor role in the recent decrease in the number of competitive districts. The main causes are, in his view, the increasing sorting of voters into political parties based on their ideological positions, residential decisions in which voters choose to live among like-minded partisans, and increasingly consistent party-line voting. In other words, the decrease in competitiveness is more a product of voter attitudes and decisions than gerrymandering.

Mann is similarly doubtful of the link between competitiveness and polarization. Examining the roll-call voting records of the 108th Congress (elected in 2002), Mann finds an uncertain relationship between members' ideological positions and measurements of the competitiveness of their districts. When competitiveness is measured by the candidates' own margin of victory (that is, a higher margin of victory, the less competitive the district), electoral safety appears to have no relationship to the members' ideological voting. However, when competitiveness is measured by the partisan composition of the district (that is, a strongly Republican or Democratic district would be

less competitive than a less homogeneous district), the anticipated pattern emerges in which competitive districts are represented by members with more moderate voting records, safe Democratic districts by members with more liberal records, and safe Republican districts by members with more conservative records.

Particularly striking to Mann, however, is “the gap in ideological voting between Democrats and Republicans across all levels of competitiveness. ... Indeed, the two parties in the House of Representatives seem to operate in distinct ideological worlds.” This ideological polarization, which “clearly operates to a substantial extent independent of the competitiveness of congressional districts,” implies that factors other than gerrymandering are responsible for much of today’s polarization in the House of Representatives.

With the weight of scholarly evidence suggesting that gerrymandering plays only a modest role in causing political polarization, Mann is doubtful that redistricting reform—putting the line-drawing process in the hands of an independent commission, for instance—can do much to moderate today’s partisan politics. Instead, a combination of electoral reforms and a return to respect for the traditional rules and norms of the Congress may be better places to start.

Why Does Polarization Matter?

Finally, why does it matter if politics are polarized? As Brookings senior fellows William A. Galston and Pietro S. Nivola observe, the polarized climate in Washington during the Bush administration has not kept Congress from passing a barrage of major legislation. In less than six years, Congress has authorized the USA Patriot Act, the Sarbanes-Oxley rules for corporate governance, reconstruction aid for the Gulf region battered by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, an expensive drug-benefit program for Medicare, federal oversight of local education policy with the No Child Left Behind Act, ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, multiple spending bills for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security.

But if the achievements of recent Congresses are proof that the harmful effects of polarization can be exaggerated, Galston and Nivola are quick to warn us that this does not mean there is no risk at all. They identify four areas in which increasing political polarization carries significant risks.

The first risk is to the reform of major domestic programs. Galston and Nivola suggest that efforts by a polarized Washington to reform programs such as Social Security are likely to be greeted with public skepticism. To move reforms forward, proponents require political cover—a form of bipartisan cooperation not likely to occur in a highly polarized environment.

Foreign policy is the second area of concern. In 2004, the two parties’ positions on foreign policy issues seemed to be not all that different. Leaders in both parties supported continuing the fight against terrorism, and the Democratic presidential candidate voiced a commitment to stay in Iraq. But beneath the surface, Democratic



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activists had begun to express dismay over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and ordinary Democratic voters were far more likely than Republicans to see the Iraq war as a mistake. The risk to carrying out a successful foreign policy, Galston and Nivola assert, is that “a course of action buffeted by polarized politicians and tugged in contradictory directions, is no course whatsoever.”

The confirmation of officials and, especially, judges, is the third area in which political polarization can have a harmful effect. “The process has become too grueling and acrimonious,” Galston and Nivola observe. This, along with incidents in which some members of Congress have rhetorically abused judges of opposing ideological persuasions, leads Galston and Nivola to caution that the country’s independent judiciary is a prized institution “not to be trifled with.”

Lastly, Galston and Nivola point out that “one way to regard the current state of America’s political parties is that their polarization tends to alienate and exclude ordinary citizens.” But on this point they are willing to indulge a bit of skepticism: Isn’t it possible that rather than alienating ordinary voters the belligerence between the parties actually makes politics interesting and draws more voters into the political process? Indeed, with 16.5 million more votes cast in the 2004 presidential election than in 2000, something must be working right.

So why worry? “Because a healthy civic culture ought to do more than bestir voters,” Galston and Nivola write, “it should build their trust in the nation’s political institutions. ... An abundance of nasty campaign advertising, negative news media slants, and outbursts by truculent politicians does not necessarily discourage people from voting, but a citizenry ingesting a steady diet of partisan vitriol may nonetheless grow disenchanted and cynical.”

And the real danger is that political leaders will continue to give a disenchanted and cynical electorate more and more vitriol—and fewer solutions to real problems.

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