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Delineating the Problem

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What do people mean when they say that politics in the United States are polarized? Polarized in what sense? How pervasively? How much more than in the past? For what reasons? Why should we care? And what, if anything, ought to be done about it? In the fall of 2005, the Governance Studies Program of the Brookings Institution, in collaboration with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, set out to explore such questions. This book is the first of two volumes resulting from our joint venture.

It should be stressed at the outset that these volumes are not meant to embellish rarified and inconclusive academic debates about the phenomenon called polarization. Rather, we are interested in getting to the bottom of the subject because a great deal of conventional wisdom presupposes not only that the nation's political divisions run deep, but also that they are wreaking great havoc.

We begin by enumerating some important points on which scholars and political observers generally agree. The U.S. Congress is more polarized ideologically than it was just a generation ago. In the House of Representatives, ideological overlap between the political parties has all but disappeared, and the rise of "safe" districts with partisan supermajorities has tended to push representatives away from the center. Activists in both parties have long been extremely polarized, and there are indications that the gap between them has

widened even more in recent decades. Technological and regulatory changes in the past two decades, since roughly the mid-1980s (including the repeal of the fairness doctrine, which prohibited broadcast news programs from engaging in overt editorializing), have revolutionized the mass media, with the result that the country's news outlets have become more numerous, diverse, and politicized.

With these realities widely recognized, what—if anything—is left for analysts to argue about? The principal bone of contention is the extent to which polarized views among political leaders and activists are reflected in the population at large. Even here there is some agreement on meaningful trends. While there is no evidence that the electorate's overall ideological balance has changed much over the past three decades, voters are being sorted: fewer self-identified Democrats or liberals vote for Republican candidates than they did in the 1970s, fewer Republicans or conservatives vote for Democratic candidates, and rank-and-file partisans are more divided in their political attitudes and policy preferences. Also, religiosity (not to be confused with the denominational hostilities of the past) has become a telling determinant of political orientations and voting behavior. All else equal, individuals who attend church frequently are more likely to regard themselves as conservatives and vote Republican.

The unsettled questions are how far these trends go and how much difference they ultimately make. Do substantial segments of the mass electorate, not just political elites, tend to cluster consistently into opposing ideological camps that differentiate the respective agendas and candidates of the political parties? Put simply, in a polarized America most Democratic and Republican voters are, if not increasingly segregated geographically, decidedly at odds over a number of salient policy issues. While the severity of the country's "culture wars" is overstated, the preponderance of evidence does suggest that some significant fissures have opened in the nation's body politic, and that they extend beyond its politicians and partisan zealots.

The fissures are interesting in themselves, but only up to a point. What can make them important is the harm they might do to the quality of political discourse and public policies, or even to the stability of American democracy. The actual extent of that harm is even more debatable than the nature and depth of the root causes, but many fear the worst. We hear that polarization accounts for gridlock over major national priorities—such as better budgetary balance, long-range reform of social insurance programs, a new generation of environmental programs, sensible immigration policy, the capacity to mount and maintain a

forceful foreign policy, and more.[1] We are told that the nation's politics and government are becoming less engaging, less responsive, and less accountable to the citizenry. We are warned that the health of vital public institutions—the Congress, the courts, the executive bureaucracy, the news media—is endangered. We are informed that rampant incivility threatens established norms of pragmatic accommodation, or worse, that civil strife may be just around the corner.[2] We are led to believe, in short, that the Republic has been rendered "dysfunctional."[3] A central aim of our study is to determine how these claims and imputations stand up under scrutiny. For without that determination, there is no way of knowing whether the country has a serious problem, never mind how to correct it.

We cannot make progress toward that end until we disentangle the phenomenon of polarization from other things with which it is often confused. As Morris P. Fiorina of Stanford University has observed, polarized politics are one thing, close division or partisan parity quite another. An election may be closely divided without being deeply polarized, as it was in 1960, or deeply polarized without being closely divided, as it was in 1936, or neither, as seems to have been the case in the famous "Era of Good Feeling" between the war of 1812 and Andrew Jackson's arrival on the presidential stage. The conventional wisdom is that the electorate has been both deeply *and* closely divided during most of the national elections of the past decade. We argue that this proposition is valid to an extent. Its proponents often go on to claim, however, that the interaction between *deep* and *close* division is bound to create inertia. But as George W. Bush's first term demonstrated, a president elected with a minority of the popular vote and working with only a razor-thin margin in Congress could achieve legislative successes even amid polarized politics—at least as long as the majority party was purposeful and unified.

Here is another important distinction: "polarization" is not synonymous with "culture war." Intense political conflict can occur along many different dimensions, of which cultural issues form only one. When Franklin D. Roosevelt

1. Here is how one of our colleagues, Thomas E. Mann of the Brookings Institution, summarized the situation in remarks at the conference "The Polarization of American Politics: Myth or Reality?" at Princeton University, December 3, 2004: "Party polarization and parity have consequences: for policy (difficulty enacting reasonable, workable, sustainable policies that are congruent with public preferences and needs); for the policy process (demise of regular order in Congress, a decline of deliberation, a weakening of our system of separation of powers and checks and balances); and for the electoral process (limited scope of competition, evermore egregious partisan manipulation of the democratic rules of the game)."

2. Hunter (1994, p. 4).

3. Rivlin (2005).

took dead aim at "economic royalists" at the height of the New Deal, his politics polarized American society. But an economic crisis, not a cultural one, was at the root of the polarization. In the election of 2004, the salience of cultural questions, although significant, was less than exit polls and media reports suggested. Nonetheless, other considerations—such as the Iraq war and America's role in the world—still divided much of the electorate. Political turmoil or tranquility, in other words, is not just a function of the extent of society's "cultural" tensions.

Of course, to say that culture is not the only possible dimension of polarization is not to deny its conspicuousness in recent analyses of American politics. For more than a decade, few objects of social commentary have stirred more hyperbole than the supposed culture clash. The nation's elections no longer are described as contests between two highly competitive political parties, but rather as a kind of holy war between red and blue states, pitting the devotees of "moral values" against their doubters.

Immediately after the balloting in 2004, for example, the prevailing journalistic story line was that morality had been a "defining issue," cited by Americans more often than any other reason for their support of President George W. Bush.[4] This interpretation came naturally. It conformed to years of oversimplifications—from candidates who perceived a "religious war" going on in our country, as well as pollsters and political operatives who spoke darkly of an evenly divided America that "inflames the passions of politicians and citizens alike"[5] and of "two massive colliding forces," one "Christian, religiously conservative," the other "socially tolerant, pro-choice, secular."[6]

The notion of a great cultural collision has also drawn sustenance from scholarly tracts. James Davison Hunter's *Culture Wars,* published in 1991, found a chasm between "orthodox" and "progressive" factions: each "can only talk past the other."[7] In a more recent book, *The Values Divide,* John Kenneth White sees "two nations." In the 2000 election, says White, their respective inhabitants cast ballots primarily on the basis of how disparately they "viewed the country's moral direction."[8]

Finally, when assessing polarization, we would sound a cautionary note: beware of visual gimmickry. The red-versus-blue election maps—an artifact of

4. See, for instance, Katharine Q. Seelye, "Moral Values Cited as a Defining Issue of the Election," *New York Times,* November 4, 2004.

5. Greenberg (2004, p. 2).

6. Republican pollster Bill McInturff was quoted in "One Nation, Fairly Divisible, Under God," *The Economist,* January 20, 2001.

7. Hunter (1991, p. 131).

8. White (2003, p. 164).

the Electoral College—are static images using rough aggregates. Underneath, partisan differences may be widening on key issues, and more voters may be choosing to live in neighborhoods and counties dominated by people with whom they agree. How to chart such changes without either oversimplifying or understating them is no easy undertaking.

Some Preliminaries

A plurality of the U.S. electorate continues to profess moderate political persuasions. In 2004, 21 percent of the voters described themselves as liberals, 34 percent said they were conservatives, and fully 45 percent were self-described moderates.[9] These numbers were practically indistinguishable from the average for the past thirty years (20 percent liberal, 33 percent conservative, 47 percent moderate).[10] Contrary to an impression left by much of the overheated punditry, the moderate middle swung both ways in the 2004 election. Both presidential candidates amassed support from these voters. Fifty-four percent of them went to the Democratic nominee, John Kerry, 45 percent to George W. Bush. In fact, the reelection of President Bush was secured chiefly by his improved performance among swing voters such as married women, Hispanics, Catholics, and less frequent church attendees—not just aroused Protestant fundamentalists.

Nor did a widely anticipated "values" Armageddon materialize over the issue of same-sex marriage. President Bush endorsed the concept of civil unions in the course of the campaign, and about half of those who thought this solution should be the law of the land wound up voting for him. Initiatives to ban same-sex marriages were on the ballot in three battleground states, yet John Kerry still managed to carry two of the three. Political scientists Stephen Ansolabehere and Charles Stewart III carefully examined county-level election returns and discovered an irony: by motivating voters and boosting turnouts, initiatives to ban gay marriage ended up aiding Kerry more than Bush.[11]

With respect to the most persistent wedge issue—abortion—there have been some unexpected twists as well. In the midst of the continuing partisan schism, a recent analysis shows that Republicans are consistently winning among those

9. Galston and Kamarck (2005, pp. 3).

10. These numbers are based on exit polls. The National Election Studies (NES) suggest that the percentage of moderates has remained stable over the past three decades, while the percentage of both liberals and conservatives has risen modestly. Complex methodological debates among the authors in this volume cloud the conclusions we feel confident about drawing from these data. Suffice it to say that there has not been a huge swing away from the center since the 1970s.

11. Ansolabehere and Stewart (2005).

voters (more than 60 percent of the electorate) who believe that policy on abortion should be more selective. Republican presidential candidates carried this group in 1996, 2000, and 2004—despite the fact that a clear majority of the group leans pro-choice and prefers that abortion be "mostly legal" rather than "mostly illegal." The staunchly pro-life Republican Party seems to be persuading millions of moderately pro-choice voters that its positions on specific abortion policies are reasonable.[12]

In the 2004 election, moral values turned out to be the leading concern of just 22 percent of the electorate—at most.[13] (When the Pew Research Center surveyed the voters with an unprompted open-ended formulation, instead of pigeonholing them with a fixed list of choices, only 14 percent of the respondents volunteered some version of "values" as their first concern.)[14] For the overwhelming majority of voters, a combination of other issues—such as the Iraq war and the threat of terrorism—were more salient. In fact, the percentage of moralists appears to have been, if anything, lower in the 2004 election than in 2000 and 1996.[15]

And what about the TV maps that depict "red" America clashing with "blue"? They are colorful but crude. Plenty of states ought to be purple.[16] There are red states—Oklahoma, Kansas, North Carolina, and Virginia, for instance—

12. Kessler and Dillon (2005).

13. Curiously, in spite of this relatively modest share, many a seasoned political analyst insisted that the "values" cleavage dominated the election. Greenberg and Carville (2004, p. 1), for example, concluded that Bush won the election largely because of the "attack on Kerry on abortion and gay marriage and the extreme cultural polarization of the country." Yet their own poll numbers indicated that the "most important issues" were Iraq, terrorism, and national security, which formed a combined total of nearly 40 percent, whereas "moral values" accounted for just under 20 percent.

14. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Voters Liked Campaign 2004, but Too Much 'Mud-Slinging,' " November 11, 2004 (people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=233).

15. "The Triumph of the Religious Right," *The Economist,* November 13, 2004. Twenty-two percent of the voters in 2004 cited moral issues, according to the prevailing exit poll estimates. But 35 percent had placed moral/ethical issues at the top in 2000, and fully 40 percent had done so in 1996. Naturally, one has to take all these figures with a large grain of salt. The figures vary with the exact survey instruments used. Nonetheless, the available numbers decidedly do not suggest that "moral values" had surged to new heights by 2004.

16. Estimates of "purple" states vary considerably according to the methodology employed. Abramowitz and Saunders (2005) provide a tally of only twelve, but other estimates suggest a near plurality of states. For example, seventeen states fell into the category according to a preelection analysis that weighed (a) the percentage margin of victory in the 2000 and 1996 election, (b) whether a state voted consistently for one party in the past four presidential elections or swung back and forth, and (c) whether trends in the previous two presidential elections made a state significantly more competitive or less. See also Richard S. Dunham and others, "Red vs. Blue: The Few Decide for the Many," *Business Week,* June 14, 2004.

that have Democratic governors, just as the bright blue states of California, New York, and even Massachusetts have Republican governors. Some red states, such as Tennessee and Mississippi, send at least as many Democrats as Republicans to the House of Representatives. Michigan and Pennsylvania—two of the biggest blue states in the last election—send more Republicans than Democrats. North Dakota is blood red (Bush ran off with 63 percent of the vote there), yet its entire congressional delegation is composed of Democrats. On election night, Bush also swept all but a half-dozen counties in Montana. But that did not prevent the Democrats from winning control of the governor's office and state legislature—or stop, we might note, the decisive adoption of an initiative allowing patients to use and grow their own medicinal marijuana.[17]

In sum, just as the actual configuration of public attitudes in the United States is more complex than the caricature of a hyper-politicized society torn between God-fearing evangelists and libertine atheists, the country's actual political geography is more complicated than the simplistic picture of a nation separated into solidly partisan states or regions.

To these prefatory observations one more should be added: for all the hype about the ruptures and partisan rancor in contemporary American society, the strife pales in comparison with much of the nation's past. There have been long stretches of American history in which conflicts were far worse. Epic struggles were waged between advocates of slavery and abolitionists, between agrarian populists and urban manufacturing interests at the end of the nineteenth century, and between industrial workers and owners of capital well into the first third of the twentieth century. Yet what those now nostalgically pining for a more tranquil past remember are the more recent intervals of consensus.

Yes, there have been interludes when it was possible to speak of "the end of ideology," in Daniel Bell's famous phrasing, but those periods have been the exception more than the norm. Of all these periods, the two decades between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s may have been the most exceptional of all. It could not last, and it did not. The relative harmony between the parties on international affairs in the 1950s collapsed amid the antiwar protests of the 1960s. A complacent entente on race gradually gave way with the Supreme Court's intervention in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* and the civil rights movement. By 1964, emerging differences between the parties had triggered a Republican surge for Senator Barry Goldwater's candidacy in the South, a harbinger of even bigger

17. The Montana Medical Marijuana Act won the approval of 61.8 percent of Montana voters, faring 3.5 percentage points better than Bush, according to statewide election data.

things to come. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Modern Republicanism" brought a period of relative partisan peace on the central question of how government should manage the economy (recall Nixon's famous admission, or boast, that "We are all Keynesians now"). The ceasefire ended, however, just a few years later with rising rates of inflation and of marginal taxation. Supply-side economics made its debut, and the Republicans, once fiscally conservative, morphed into the party of lower marginal tax rates secured by permanent (as distinct from strictly countercyclical) tax cuts.[18]

Any serious exploration of today's political polarities has to be placed in historical context. We have to ask: compared to what? Four decades ago, cities were burning across the United States. A sitting president, one presidential candidate, and the leader of the civil rights movement were assassinated. Another sitting president was driven from office, another presidential candidate was shot, and a hail of bullets felled antiwar demonstrators at Kent State University. George W. Bush is, by current standards, a "polarizing president." But in comparison with, say, Abraham Lincoln or Lyndon Johnson, the divisions of the Bush era appear shallower and more muted.

Polarization in Perspective

Badly in need of a reality check, popularized renditions of the polarization narrative were subjected to a more systematic assessment a couple of years ago in a book provocatively titled *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America.* In this intriguing study, rich with survey data, Stanford's Fiorina and his associates reaffirmed the oft-obscured fundamental fact that most Americans have remained centrists, sharing a mixture of liberal and conservative views on a variety of presumably divisive social questions. Ideologues of the left or right—that is, persons with a *Weltanschauung,* or whose politics consistently form an overarching world view that tilts to extremes—are conspicuous on the fringes of the two parties and among political elites, but scarcely among the public at large. Indeed, sentiments there appear to be moderating, not polarizing, on various hot-button issues. To cite a couple of striking examples, the authors found notable increases in social acceptance of interracial dating and of homosexuality.[19]

18. In a series of papers, Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey have shown that rather than one dimension of conflict diminishing or displacing prior dimensions, most have been layered on top of one another since the 1960s, a process they call "conflict extension." See especially Layman and Carsey (2002a, 2002b).

19. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, pp. 109–26).

Moreover, the authors argued, the moderate consensus seems almost ubiquitous. The inhabitants of red states and blue states differ little on matters such as gender equity, fair treatment of blacks in employment, capital punishment, and the merits of environmental protection.[20] Majorities in both places appear to oppose outlawing abortion completely or permitting it under all circumstances, and their opinions have changed little over the past thirty years.

Fiorina's findings squared with earlier research by several social scientists. In an important article published in 1996, Princeton sociologist Paul DiMaggio and coauthors John H. Evans and Bethany Bryson found little empirical evidence for supposing that social attitudes had become more polar in the U.S. population.[21] On the contrary, gaps among groups over race and gender issues, crime, sexual morality, and the role of the welfare state had either remained constant or narrowed over time. Similarly, after studying eight communities in depth, Alan Wolfe of Boston College concluded in his book, *One Nation, After All,* that Americans had grown more, not less, tolerant and united on such issues.[22]

That said, the central motif of Fiorina's work is not that signs of polarization are *nowhere* to be found. Again, the argument is that they exist, but principally amid the parties' most active antagonists, while the rest of the population mostly looks on. That observation is scarcely novel or controversial. For years, other scholars had been observing the tendency of the political class to grow more partisan.[23]

DiMaggio and his associates discerned a pattern of "depolarization" among Americans when classified by age, education, sex, race, region, and even religion. The main exception was persons who clearly identified themselves as political partisans. These had drawn apart, and according to more recent data have continued to do so.[24]

No knowledgeable observer doubts that the American public is less divided than the political agitators and vocal elective office-seekers who claim to represent it. The interesting question, though, is, how substantial are the portions of

20. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, p. 16).

21. DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996).

22. Wolfe (1998, p. 320). For additional support of this general proposition, see Baker (2005); Davis and Robinson (1996).

23. See Poole and Rosenthal (1984, 2001); King (1999); Layman and Carsey (2000).

24. Evans (2003). In Evans's words, "political activists are becoming more polarized over the issues that have been of concern to politically active religious conservatives." For a contrary perspective, see Collie and Mason (1999).

the electorate that heed their opinion leaders, and thus might be hardening their political positions? Here, as best we can tell, the tectonic plates of the nation's electoral politics appear to be shifting more than Fiorina and his coauthors were willing to concede.

Even though the mass electorate has long formed three comparably sized blocs (29 percent identifying themselves as Republicans, 33 percent as Democrats, and almost all the rest as independents), the attributes of the Democratic and Republican identifiers have changed. They are considerably more cohesive ideologically than just a few decades ago.[25] In the 1970s it was not unusual for the Democratic Party to garner as much as a quarter of the votes of self-described conservatives, while the GOP enjoyed a nearly comparable share of the liberal vote. Since then, those shares have declined precipitously.[26] In 2004 Kerry took 85 percent of the liberal vote, while Bush claimed nearly that percentage among conservative voters.

Further, as their outlooks tracked party loyalties more closely, Democratic and Republican voters became far less likely to desert their party's candidates. As Princeton University political scientist Larry Bartels has demonstrated, party affiliation is a much stronger predictor of voting behavior in recent presidential elections than it was in earlier ones.[27] In 2004 nearly nine out of every ten Republicans said they approved of George W. Bush. A paltry 12 percent of Democrats concurred. In an earlier day, three to four times as many Democrats had held favorable opinions of Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and Dwight Eisenhower.

25. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Democrats Gain Edge in Party Identification," July 26, 2004 (people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=95). These shares have varied over time, but those in 2004 were almost identical to those in 1987. Some analysts stress that within the three-part division, the fastest growing group has been persons registering as independents or "other." Even if everyone in this category were a genuine centrist—a big "if"—the main thing to remember is that most registered voters continue to identify as either Democrats or Republicans, and, as we shall show, their views are diverging in a number of important respects. Moreover, in a significant recent analysis, Keele and Stimson (2005) show that the share of "pure" independents (voters who do not consider themselves closer to one party than to the other) has fallen by half since the early 1970s, from 14 percent of the electorate to just over 7 percent. More than three-quarters of self-declared independents now admit to being closer to one party than to the other.

26. Galston and Kamarck (2005, p. 45). A generation ago, party identification and ideology were weakly correlated. Now the two are much more tightly intertwined. See also Abramowitz and Saunders (1998, 2004).

27. Bartels (2000).

Deepening Disagreements

Of course, the use of the terms liberal and conservative can be squishy—and if, at bottom, there is still not much more than a dime's worth of difference (as the saying used to go) between the convictions of Democrats and Republicans, the fact that partisans are voting more consistently along party lines says little about how polarized they might be. What counts, in other words, is the *distance* between their respective sets of convictions.

On the issues that mattered, the distance was considerable. Consider the main one: national security and foreign policy. The Pew Research Center's surveys found, for example, that while almost seven in ten Republicans felt that the best way to ensure peace is through military strength, fewer than half of Democrats agreed.[28] In October 2003, 85 percent of Republicans thought going to war in Iraq was the right decision, while only 39 percent of Democrats did.[29] When asked whether "wrongdoing" by the United States might have motivated the attacks of September 11, a *majority* of Democrats, but just 17 percent of Republicans, said yes. Democrats assigned roughly equal priority to the war on terrorism and protecting American jobs (86 percent and 89 percent, respectively). By comparison, Republicans gave far greater weight to fighting terrorism than to worker protection.[30]

Popular support for the Iraq war has sagged since these surveys were taken. Yet, as of March 2006, nearly seven out of ten Republicans still perceived the U.S. military effort in Iraq as going well, while only three out of ten Democrats agreed. Two-thirds of Democrats (but only 27 percent of Republicans) felt the United States should bring its troops home as soon as possible.[31] Not surprisingly, fully 76 percent of the electorate saw important differences between the parties in 2004, a level never previously recorded in modern survey research.[32]

28. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "2004 Political Landscape: Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized," November 5, 2003 (people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=196).

29. By December 2003, the percentage of Republicans holding this view rose to 90 percent. The percentage of Democrats went up to 56 percent, before dropping back again later on. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "After Hussein's Capture . . . ," December 18, 2003 (people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=199).

30. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Foreign Policy Attitudes Now Driven by 9/11 and Iraq," August 18, 2004 (people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=222).

31. David Kirkpatrick and Adam Nagourney, "In an Election Year, a Shift in Public Opinion on the War," *New York Times,* March 27, 2006. The polling data reported in this article were also based on Pew surveys that queried respondents on whether the war was going "very well or fairly well."

32. For data on this going back to 1952, see the American National Election Studies (www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/toptable/tab2b_4.htm).

Among so-called active partisans, who represent a nontrivial fifth of all voters, the gap was even more dramatic.[33] Reviewing 2004 National Election Study data, Alan I. Abramowitz of Emory University and Kyle Saunders of Colorado State University report that 70 percent of Democrats, but just 11 percent of Republicans, typically favored diplomacy over the use of force. On major questions of domestic policy, the difference was only a little less pronounced. The issue of health insurance, for example, ranked high for 66 percent of the Democrats, but for only 15 percent of the Republicans.[34]

Then there is the matter of abortion. Following the Supreme Court's *Roe* v. *Wade* decision, no domestic issue has been more contentious. And no other issue has played a bigger role in mobilizing observant religious voters (a force about which we will have more to say later). A majority of Americans accept abortion under various circumstances. But the majority wobbles when abortion is framed as an absolutely unrestricted right to choose. The persistence of this dichotomy is noteworthy. Fiorina and his colleagues, in fact, provide perhaps the most emblematic evidence of the ongoing rift. When people were asked in 2003 whether abortion should be called an act of murder, 46 percent said yes and exactly 46 percent demurred.[35] No doubt, if the question had been directed only at persons who identified themselves as Republican or Democratic loyalists, the percentages would have been even higher, and the underlying passions even more polar.

Redder Reds, Bluer Blues

In assessing these deepening disagreements we must also consider the territorial contours of today's polarization. The question is of importance because if voters tend to migrate geographically toward like-minded voters, the resulting political segregation of Democrats and Republicans could increasingly lock in their differences: a person's partisan inclinations seem more likely to deepen and endure if he or she is spatially surrounded by fellow partisans.

According to Fiorina and his associates, no wide gulf separates the residents of Republican-leaning (red) states and Democratic-leaning (blue) states. But states are large aggregates in which the minority party almost always obtains one-third or more of the vote. This raises the question of what constitutes a sig-

33. Active partisans are defined as voters who are engaged in two or more political activities other than voting.

34. Abramowitz and Saunders (2005).

35. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, p. 81).

nificant difference among states. Consider some of the data Fiorina himself presents from the 2000 election. In red states, Republican identifiers slightly outnumbered Democrats, but in blue states, Democrats enjoyed an edge of 15 percentage points. In red states, the share of the electorate that was conservative was 20 points larger than the share characterized as liberal. Blue state residents were 15 points less likely to attend church regularly, 11 points more supportive of abortion rights, 12 points more likely to favor stricter gun control, and 16 points more likely to strongly favor gays in the military.[36] Polarization exists to some extent in the eye of the beholder. We think, though, that these and other quantitative differences between red and blue states are large enough to make a qualitative difference.

The results of the 2004 election only reinforced this judgment. Using a slightly different definition of red and blue states (namely, states that Bush or Kerry won by at least 6 percentage points), Abramowitz and Saunders find differences in excess of 20 points along numerous dimensions, from church attendance to gun ownership to attitudes on hot-button social issues such as abortion and gay marriage.[37]

There are indications, moreover, that red states have gotten redder and blue states bluer, at least in this sense: presidential vote tallies in more states in recent years have strayed from the national norm. To be sure, this pattern of differentiation could be subject to change. Suppose, as a thought experiment, a presidential election were held as of this writing (in the spring of 2006), and that Bush was an incumbent seeking another term. With his popularity at its present lows and solid majorities of residents in states he had carried in 2004 now expressing disapproval, quite a few "red" states might more accurately be colored pink or even pale blue.[38] But at least as of 2004, it was clear that the presidential candidates' margins of victory in more and more states had widened.

In 1988 there were only fifteen states in which George H. W. Bush won with a vote share greater than 5 percentage points above his national average, and only nine states in which his share was more than 5 points below his national average. Put another way, twenty-six states were within a 5 point range of his 53.4 percent share of the national vote. By contrast, in 2004, George W. Bush carried twenty states with a share of the vote more than 5 points above his

36. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, pp. 43–44).
37. Abramowitz and Saunders (2005, p. 13).
38. See Richard Morin, "Pink Is the New Red," *Washington Post,* April 17, 2006.

national share, in twelve states he ended up more than 5 points below it, and in just eighteen states his share fell within the 5 point range.[39]

These results are not an artifact of an arbitrary selection of elections. In the election of 1960, which produced a near tie in the popular vote between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, a remarkable thirty-seven states yielded results within 5 percentage points of the national margin. In 2000, another election year with a razor-thin popular vote margin, only twenty-one states ended up within this range. These results do not reflect only the polarizing consequences of George W. Bush's campaign and style of governance. In the 1996 race between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, only twenty-two states were within 5 points of the national margin, nearly identical to the 2000 result. In fact, the past three presidential elections have produced three of the four most polarized state results in the past half-century. (The Reagan-Carter election of 1980 is the fourth.)[40]

There also has been evidence of increasing dispersion at the substate level. One way to get closer to developments on the ground is to examine the share of the population living in places where voters sided with one party or the other by lopsided margins. Compare the three closest elections of the past generation. In 1976, when Jimmy Carter beat incumbent Gerald Ford by a scant 2 percentage points, only 27 percent of voters lived in landslide counties (where one candidate wins by 20 points or more). In 2000, when Al Gore and George W. Bush fought to a virtual draw, 45 percent of voters lived in such counties. By 2004, that figure had risen even further, to 48 percent.[41]

39. Galston and Kamarck (2005, p. 54). Using a different methodology, Abramowitz and Saunders (2005) reach a parallel conclusion. Comparing two presidential elections (1976 and 2004) with nearly identical popular vote margins, they found that the average state margin of victory rose from 8.9 percentage points to 14.8 percentage points, the number of uncompetitive states (with margins of 10 points or more) rose from nineteen to thirty-one, and the number of competitive states (with margins between 0 and 5 points) fell by half, from twenty-four to twelve. Not surprisingly, the number of electoral votes in uncompetitive states soared from 131 to 332. These numbers merely confirm what every contemporary presidential campaign manager instinctively understands: in normal political circumstances, when neither party has suffered a major reversal (a big-time scandal or policy failure, for instance), the actual field of battle has tended to be small and concentrated in the Midwest.

40. William A. Galston and Andrew S. Lee; tabulations on file with the authors.

41. Bill Bishop, "The Great Divide," *Austin American-Statesman,* December 4, 2004. See also Bill Bishop, "The Cost of Political Uniformity," *Austin American-Statesman,* April 8, 2004; Bill Bishop, "Political Parties Now Rooted in Different Americas," *Austin American-Statesman,* September 18, 2004; Bill Bishop, "The Schism in U.S. Politics Begins at Home," *Austin American-Statesman,* April 4, 2004.

In 2004 fully 60 percent of the nation's counties handed supermajorities of 60 percent or more to either Bush or Kerry. The corresponding figure for the 2000 election was 53 percent, and for the 1996 race it was just 38 percent.[42] As far as we can tell, the 2004 percentage was exceeded only once in the past half-century, when Richard Nixon routed George McGovern in 1972. In the earlier close elections of 1960 and 1976, landslide counties represented 48 and 37 percent, respectively, of the total. The figures from 2000 and 2004 thus strike us as significant.[43]

To be sure, depicting the political landscape exclusively on the basis of vote tallies for presidential candidates is not wholly satisfying—and again, 2008 could conceivably alter much of the terrain we have described. As we remarked earlier, more evidence would be needed to demonstrate the significance of the country's partisan geographic divide. For example, one would need to show that elective offices down the line—Senate and House seats, governorships, state legislatures—are also now falling like dominos into the hands of one party or the other.

While we do not attempt so laborious an analysis here, this much is relatively easy to see: the number of congressional districts that voted for different parties in presidential and congressional contests has declined. Typically, this number decreases between a presidential election and the following midterm. But just the opposite happened between 2000 and 2002, yielding the fewest split districts in at least half a century. In 2004 a mere fifty-nine congressional districts went in opposite directions in presidential and House elections. Compare this low figure to 2000, when there were eighty-six such districts, or 1996 and 1992, when there were more than a hundred.[44] Or compare the 2002 midterm figure of sixty-two with the three previous midterms, which averaged almost precisely twice that number.[45]

These trends have not been confined to the House. In 2004 the percentage of states won by the same party in that year's Senate and presidential races rose to a level not seen for forty years, and the percentage of Senate seats held by the party winning that state in the most recent presidential election rose to the highest

42. Mark Mellman, "Americans Are Voting as a Bloc," *The Hill,* January 19, 2005.

43. Galston and Lee; tabulations on file with the authors. For the methodological debate sparked by the initial county-level findings, see Klinkner (2004); Bishop and Cushing (2004). Klinkner and Hapanowicz (2005) acknowledge an increase in landslide counties between 2000 and 2004.

44. Dan Balz, "Partisan Polarization Intensified in 2004 Election," *Washington Post,* March 29, 2005.

45. Jacobson (2003a, p. 12).

level in at least half a century. As one might infer from these results, by 2004 the percentage of partisans voting for the other party's House or Senate candidates had fallen to levels not seen since the early 1960s.[46]

In sum, although these data hardly paint a complete picture, they do suggest that sizable blocs in the national electorate have not been conducting centrist business as usual. Like the elections of 1960 and 1976, those of 2000 and 2004 were closely contested. Unlike the elections of 1960 and 1976, the past two were slugged out primarily in a small handful of states. Elsewhere, larger shares of voters seem to have gotten sorted into states more strongly predisposed to one side or the other. And the predispositions seem rooted in appreciably different characteristics. We are inclined to concur with Fiorina that such contrasts fall well short of proving that Americans are mostly a bunch of "culture warriors." But we also suspect that where there is smoke there may be, if not exactly a four-alarm fire, some significant friction.

Sorting

What has happened in the electorate has much to do with how sharply political elites have separated along their respective philosophical and party lines. That separation is not in doubt. In the 1970s, the ideological orientations of many Democratic and Republican members of Congress overlapped. Today, the congruence has nearly vanished. By the end of the 1990s, almost every Republican in the House was more conservative than every Democrat. And increasingly, their leaders leaned to extremes more than the backbenchers have. Outside Congress, activists in the political parties have diverged sharply from one another in recent decades. Meanwhile, interest groups, particularly those concerned with cultural issues, have proliferated and now ritually line up with one party or the other to enforce the party creed. Likewise, the news media, increasingly partitioned through politicized talk-radio programs, cable news channels, and Internet sites, amplify party differences.

These changes, the reality of which hardly anyone contests, raise an important scholarly question with profound practical implications: what are the effects of elite polarization on the mass electorate? One possibility raised by Fiorina and others is that the people as a whole are not shifting their ideological or policy *preferences* much. Rather, they are being presented with increasingly polarized *choices,* which force voters to change their political behavior in ways

46. Jacobson (2005, pp. 208–10).

that analysts mistake for shifts in underlying preferences.[47] A plausible inference is that if both parties nominated relatively moderate, nonpolarizing candidates, as they did in 1960 and again in 1976, voters' behavior might revert significantly toward previous patterns. Another possibility is that changes at the elite level have communicated new information about parties, ideology, and policies to many voters, leading to changes of attitudes and preferences that will be hard to reverse, even in less polarized circumstances.

Both processes can occur. On the one hand, there is no reason to believe that today's voters are unresponsive to changes in choices that the parties offer. The Democratic Party's decision to nominate more moderate presidential candidates in 1960, 1976, and 1992 (in the wake of more liberal but failed candidacies) did shift mass perceptions and behavior. A 2008 presidential contest between, say, Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) and a Democratic nominee seen as more moderate than Gore and Kerry would almost certainly change the dynamics of party competition.[48]

On the other hand, there is evidence suggesting that as party hierarchies, members of Congress, media outlets, and advocacy groups polarize, so gradually does much of the public. Voters become more aware of the differences between the parties, they are better able to locate themselves in relation to the parties, and they care more about the outcome of elections. As a result, their partisan preferences become better aligned with their ideological and policy preferences.[49] Marc J. Hetherington of Vanderbilt University has shed light on how this mass "sorting" takes place. Voters (especially the attentive ones) exposed to the drumbeat of partisan and ideological disputes among opinion leaders eventually pick up their messages.[50] The partisan polemics at the elite level signal what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican, and hence help voters align with the party whose position best approximates their own. Abetting people's receptivity to political cues is the increased influence of education. In 1900

47. See Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, pp. 165–86).

48. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the shift between George W. Bush's relatively moderate 2000 campaign and a more conservative line in 2004 had the effect of further polarizing the electorate. There is little evidence, however, that underlying public attitudes on most basic issues shifted dramatically and durably in the course of these four years. See Abramowitz and Stone (2005).

49. For evidence and discussion on these points, see Brewer (2005); Jacobson (2003b); Baumer and Gold (2005).

50. Hetherington (2001). See also Abramowitz and Saunders (1998); Layman and Carsey (2000); McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006, p. 44). In an important book, Zaller (1992) began to explore how elite opinion affects mass opinion.

only 10 percent of young Americans went to high school. Today, 84 percent of adult Americans are high school graduates, and almost 27 percent have graduated from college. "This extraordinary growth in schooling," writes James Q. Wilson, "has produced an ever larger audience for political agitation."[51]

The interaction between elite cues and voter responses is complex and varied. A recent analysis suggests that voters who have positioned themselves clearly on an issue, care intensely about it, and see important differences between the parties over it choose sides accordingly. For other voters who care less about a given issue, party identification is the primary driver: When their party changes its position, they tend to change as well. And those voters who do not perceive differences between the parties (a diminishing share of the electorate) will likely change neither their party nor their position on the issue.[52]

Thus far we have discussed issue-induced or partisan shifts among voters with prior positions. But elite polarization has another dimension—namely, its effects on young adults entering the electorate without fully formed preferences and attachments. In an important analysis of 1972–2004 National Election Study data, M. Kent Jennings and Laura Stoker find evidence that the increasingly polarized parties and their activists tend to polarize young adults whose attitudes, once formed, are likely to remain stable over a lifetime. Jennings and Stoker also find evidence that, for young adults, new dimensions of polarization add to rather than displace older divisions; that is, race, gender, culture, and religion do not erase the impact of New Deal–based divisions about the role of government in the economy.[53] Especially in the case of the young, partisan polarization not only sorts but also shapes basic political orientations and party allegiances.

The cue-taking that has helped fuse ideology with party loyalty at the grass roots, in turn, reinforces the hyper-partisan style of candidates for elective office and their campaign strategies. Given the increasing proportion of the electorate that is sorted by ideology, mobilizing a party's core constituency, rather than trying to convert the uncommitted, looks (correctly or not) more and more like a winning strategy.[54] And that means fielding hard-edged politicians appealing to, and certified by, the party's base. This electoral connection—and not just endogenous partisan incentives within institutions such as the House of Representatives—may help account for the increasingly polarized Congress of recent decades. And,

51. See James Q. Wilson, "How Divided Are We?" *Commentary,* February 2006, pp. 15–21.
52. Carsey and Layman (2006).
53. Stoker and Jennings (2006).
54. Levendusky (2005).

as Gary C. Jacobson has suggested, it may even account for a tendency of Democrats and Republicans to move further apart the longer they stay in office.[55]

It would be a mistake, however, to see only one-way causality in the relation between changes at the elite and mass levels. History supports Jacobson's contention that political elites in search of a winning formula anticipate voters' potential responses to changed positions on the issues and are therefore constrained to some extent by that assessment. The Republican Party's southern strategy reflected a judgment that Democratic support for civil rights had created an opportunity to shift voters and (eventually) party identification as well. The Democrats' transition from a moderate stance on abortion in 1976 to a less nuanced one by 1984 rested on a judgment that this move would attract the better-educated, younger, more upscale voters who had been activated politically by Vietnam and Watergate.[56]

A feedback loop that mutually reinforces polarized comportment up and down the political food chain has at least a couple of important implications. For one, the idea that self-inspired extremists are simply foisting polar choices on the wider public, while the latter holds its nose, does not quite capture what is going on. While it is possible to distinguish conceptually between polarization and sorting, the evidence suggests that over the past three decades these two phenomena cannot be entirely decoupled. Polarized politics are partly here, so to speak, by popular demand. And inasmuch as that is the case, undoing it may prove especially difficult—and perhaps not wholly appropriate.

Root Causes

Underlying the sharper demarcation of Democratic and Republican identities, from top to bottom, is a broad assortment of systemic forces, forces that will be the focus of several chapters in this volume. For now, a few of the main markers can be sketched. They include certain large historical transformations, the changing role of religion, the mass media, and the way representatives are elected to Congress.

HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

First on the list has to be the regional realignment of the parties.[57] After Barry Goldwater carried five states in the Deep South in 1964, it became clear that the

55. See Jacobson (2000, 2003b, 2004). Importantly, Jacobson's findings apply to both the House and the Senate.

56. Jacobson (2000).

57. Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani (2003).

Democratic Party's lock on the region had loosened. The Republican ascent in the South accelerated in the wake of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which mobilized black voters and drove additional white conservatives out of the Democratic Party.[58] As the Democrats lost their conservative southern base, they consolidated strength among more liberal constituencies prominent elsewhere—in particular, much of the Northeast and eventually California. At the same time, Republican moderates began losing their traditional foothold in regions such as New England, diminishing the party's internal ballast against harder-line conservatives. The GOP, now anchored in the South and West, became more orthodox.[59]

The famous *Roe* v. *Wade* decision exacerbated party divisions. In 1972, the year before *Roe,* neither party's platform even mentioned abortion. In 1976 both parties held moderate (and nearly interchangeable) positions. Over the next two presidential cycles, however, activists in the two parties moved farther away from one another, and by 1984 the party platforms had settled into the polarized paradigms that have persisted over the past two decades.[60]

Ronald Reagan further clarified the Republican agenda, championing bold tax cuts, retrenchment of the welfare state, and, not least, a much more muscular national defense than the Democrats advocated. The latter consideration warrants more attention than has been paid by much historiography on the transformative events defining modern American party politics.[61] The Vietnam War, and later the lowering of East-West tensions, shattered the bipartisan unity that had prevailed in foreign policy during much of the cold war. The Democrats moved left. The party's standard-bearer in 1972, it should be recalled, proposed slashing the U.S. defense budget by one-third. Soon after, the Democratic majority leader in the Senate was to be the author of a legislative proposal calling for drastic reductions of U.S. forces in Europe. By 1983, when the Reagan administration was determined to deploy Pershing missiles in Europe to counterbalance the Soviet Union's provocative deployment of its intermediate-range missiles, Democratic majorities in the House of Representatives were adopting resolutions supporting a nuclear freeze. Deviations like these signaled to the party bases a growing contrast—one that would reach its starkest manifestation seven years later, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and most Democratic senators declined to approve the use of force against the aggressor.

58. Rohde (1992).
59. See Black and Black (2002).
60. For a more detailed account of this change, see Galston (2004).
61. On what follows, see Nivola (1997, p. 250).

The end of the cold war ushered in what one of us has called "the age of low politics."[62] Relieved of the need to pull together in the face of a great external threat, the political parties now could afford to pull apart—and to wrangle about every manner of domestic issue, regardless how parochial, petty, or picayune. Thus, luxuriating in their holiday from foreign affairs, the congressional parties indulged in long and bitter quarrels over matters such as raising the minimum wage by a few cents or the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. (For all but four House Republicans in 1998, impeaching the president had become an idée fixe. One wonders whether their zest for it would have been quite so unsparing if the fall of 1998 had been, say, the fall of 1962, when the country and the world stood at the brink of nuclear annihilation.)

Intensifying the partisan squabbles has been the extraordinary parity of the competitors. With the parties evenly matched, unusually small margins now make the difference between winning and losing the presidency, the House, or the Senate. With so much riding on marginal changes in party support, it is not surprising to see both sides clawing to gain an edge by whatever means are deemed effective. Hence, if the GOP can add a few seats to its majority in the House by manipulating congressional district lines in Texas, it seizes the opportunity without hesitation. When the Democratic opposition spots a chance to trip up a Republican president's judicial nominees, it rarely seems to hesitate either. When competing in a dead heat, anything goes.

The news media thrive on the perpetual feuding because partisan machinations, stridency, and acrimony make good copy. This calculation, of course, is not new, but several factors appear to have heightened it in recent times. The mainstream media—the three old-line broadcast networks and the national newspapers—have more rivals. The number of Americans receiving their news from network television or daily newspapers has been declining steadily.[63] Internet outlets, talk-radio stations, and cable channels pitching to narrow cultural and politically attentive audiences have proliferated. This niche-oriented industry increasingly resembles a high-tech cousin of the combative partisan press of the nineteenth century—a development further facilitated by the repeal of the fairness doctrine.

Of course, it is far from self-evident which side—politicized journalism or its audience—is the principal agent driving deeper wedges. The new media are

62. Nivola (2003).
63. Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005).

cultivating their particular partisan and ideological markets but are also responding to the emergence of those markets.[64] The latter, in turn, reflect changes under way in the mass electorate.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

One such change pertains to the role of religious voters. To be sure, religion has always played a prominent part in U.S. politics, and we would be hard-pressed to claim that its significance today is more notable than the sectarian political currents in the past. At one time, denominational distinctions—Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, Baptists and Lutherans—had a strong partisan cast. Those patterns have waned. But a new one has clearly emerged: the contrast between the voting behavior of the most active worshipers and everybody else in the past four presidential elections has widened when compared with modern historical levels. From 1952 through 1988, Democratic presidential candidates tended to fare only about 2 percentage points worse among regular churchgoers than among voters who attended church infrequently or not at all. Starting in 1992, the religion gap grew to an average of nearly 12 points.[65] The most religiously observant voters, almost irrespective of denomination, leaned to the Republican standard-bearer in the 2000 election, and even more so in 2004.

The reason is straightforward. Religious observance and political preference now are powerfully correlated. More than half of those who attend church weekly call themselves conservatives, four times the percentage of those who regard themselves as liberals. What has sent regular churchgoers to the right is the undeniable impact (on them) of the abortion issue most notably, but also other social and cultural concerns such as sex education and school prayer.[66]

64. See Hamilton (2006).

65. Galston and Kamarck (2005, pp. 43, 47–48). For parallel findings based on white voters only, see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, pp. 132–34).

66. Bartels (2005) finds that the impact of social issues on party affiliation and presidential preference among regular churchgoers has more than doubled since 1984. Abortion remains the great wedge issue, splitting frequent church-attending white voters and those who seldom or never attend. According to Abramowitz and Saunders (2005), the former oppose legal abortion by 69 percent, the latter by only 22 percent. On how polarization between self-described conservatives and liberals seems to have broadened to encompass additional cultural issues, see Evans (2003, pp. 16–18, 30–32).

We are not yet convinced that faith-based forces have polarized the political parties more than other factors have.[67] The divorce between the adherents of "hard" and "soft" stances on questions of national security, for example, strikes us as no less consequential. Notice, moreover, that potent faith-based constituencies do not *always* skew a party's policies to the right. Religious conservatives in the Republican ranks, for example, have favored increasing antipoverty programs (even if they mean more debt or higher taxes), stricter environmental standards, and foreign aid (to combat problems such as HIV/AIDS).[68]

Also, pure polarization implies a symmetrical dynamic, in which more or less equally robust blocs of voters on *both* sides of the political spectrum are gravitating toward the poles. But while religious traditionalists appear to be flocking to the Republican Party, the "true loyalists" (pollster Stanley Greenberg's phrase) of the Democratic Party include more than secularists.[69] Millions of Protestants, "modernist" evangelicals, Vatican II Catholics, and non-Orthodox Jews regularly vote Democratic. Indeed, while losing the evangelical Protestant vote by more than three to one, John Kerry and George W. Bush split the mainline Protestant vote precisely down the middle.[70] This reality probably constrains the party from embracing a maximally secular agenda, even though the Democratic base is certainly loaded with staunch secularists.

Nonetheless, the concentration of fervent fundamentalists at the core of the Republican Party unquestionably matters. At a minimum, it has ensured that key symbolic issues—*Roe* v. *Wade,* end-of-life decisions, "intelligent design," bioethics, and so forth—form a distinct partisan fault line. And the valence effect of such issues for the party bases seems unlikely to diminish anytime soon.

67. Some multivariate analysis does suggest, though, that church attendance has had an increasingly distinct impact on voting. This appears to have been particularly true in 2004. See Pew Research Center (2005, p. 29). On the other hand, it turns out that white born-again Christians are even more polarized by income than are other white voters. For born-agains, the gap between high-income and low-income Republican Party identification is more than 30 percentage points, compared to only 20 points for other white voters. See McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006, pp. 100–01).

68. The Pew Research Center has developed a three-part classification of respondents with GOP allegiances. One of the groups, characterized by frequent attendance at church, Bible study, or prayer group meetings, appeared to be overwhelmingly (80 percent) in favor of the proposition that "the government should do more to help needy Americans even if it means going deeper into debt." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Beyond Red vs. Blue," May 10, 2005 (people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=242).

69. Greenberg (2004).

70. See Green and others (2004).

Of course, these issues could recede somewhat if cross-cutting concerns that traditionally animated voters—perhaps, most notably, economic ones—regain their former dominance.

Although voting behavior continues to correlate with income levels, the dominance of pocketbook issues has declined relative to various other issues.[71] Indeed, there is considerable debate now about the actual political weight of economic concerns.[72] As both parties became "Keynesians" and learned to tame the business cycle, unemployment faded somewhat as a determinant in American elections. In the twenty-two years that spanned November 1982 and election day 2004, the U.S. economy was in recession a mere one-twentieth of the time. The political economy was altogether different in the four decades preceding 1982, when recessions afflicted the electorate more than one-fifth of the time. We might thus expect cultural themes with their religious overtones to remain prominent. On the other hand, Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal find a suggestive correlation between the rise in polarization over the past three decades and the increase in economic inequality during that period. By contrast, in the years after World War II, when the New Deal coalition was alive and well, income and partisanship were only weakly correlated.[73]

HOW CONGRESS GETS ELECTED

In each of the first fifteen elections for the House of Representatives following World War II, either the Republicans or the Democrats gained an average of twenty-nine seats. In the past fifteen elections, the average switch was thirteen seats. By 2004, less than 10 percent of the House was being seriously contested. When the votes were counted, the composition of even gigantic delegations, such as California's, proved immutable. (None of California's fifty-three seats changed parties in 2004.) Competitive districts are vanishing.[74]

71. See Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, p. 136).

72. Bartels (2005) argues that white voters in the bottom third of the income distribution remain reliably Democratic, presumably because these voters remain preoccupied with long-standing economic concerns. Still, perceptions of economic self-interest, and the total shares of voters choosing a party affiliation for reasons of economic insecurity or risk-averseness, may not be quite the same in the post-Keynesian age.

73. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006, chap. 3).

74. Earlier in this essay, we noted that a number of red-state congressional delegations are composed of Democratic as well as Republican members. A caveat: a few of these Democrats hold safe seats, in carefully contoured minority districts. Thus, the state delegations can appear to be more mixed than they otherwise would be.

Exactly what has eroded the competitiveness of congressional elections is the subject of much scholarly debate. One school of thought points to the way districts are delineated. Increasingly sophisticated computer software has refined the ability of political cartographers to map with pinpoint precision the spatial distribution of voters needed to maximize partisan advantage, and then to gerrymander the boundaries accordingly. Another school stresses the power of incumbency: The unmatched capacity of House incumbents to bankroll their reelections is at an all-time high.[75] Still another emphasizes the dynamics of political segregation, whereby politically homogenized districts develop when voters tip the balance by moving to be near fellow partisans.[76]

The alternative explanations hinge in part on methodological subtleties. To assess the impact of gerrymanders on the relative competitiveness of districts, for example, Alan Abramowitz has looked at the normalized presidential vote within districts before and after each redistricting (following each decennial census). He surmises that if partisan redistricting were the reason for the decline in competitive races, the number of competitive districts should have fallen every time. Finding no such decrease in 1992, he argues that other factors must be at work in the long-term loss of competitiveness.[77] Complicating Abramowitz's inference, however, is the effect of a significant third-party candidate, Ross Perot, in the 1992 election. Perot drew down the vote shares for both major-party candidates, thus making it seem as if more districts had been contestable.

Whatever the source of noncompetitive elections, a profusion of one-party districts drives moderates out of Congress.[78] In such districts, candidates have little incentive to reach out to voters across party lines. The imperative instead becomes to appeal to the base and preempt possible primary challenges from the extremes. The direct primary (or threat thereof), not the general election, becomes the defining political event. In theory, in a simple two-party electoral system the natural tendency of candidates competing for single-member districts is to move toward the center of the spectrum. But the balloting in primaries

75. Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin (2006).

76. See, for instance, Oppenheimer (2005). Also see Bill Bishop, "The Schism in U.S. Politics Begins at Home," *Austin American-Statesman,* April 4, 2004.

77. Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning (2005). Similarly, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006, pp. 63–67) find that the curve representing party vote shares by congressional district virtually coincides with the curve representing vote shares by county, the boundaries of which are not much subject to political manipulation. This suggests that the congressional districting process contributes little to polarization.

78. For a contrary view, see King (1999).

often discourages this convergence. The electorate in these contests tends to be small (under 18 percent now, even in presidential primaries), unrepresentative, and highly motivated. Candidates protect their flanks by positioning themselves further to the left or right of the general public on issues that the primary clientele regards as litmus tests.[79]

The number of Democratic Party primaries for House seats remained about the same in the thirty years from 1962 to 1992, but on the Republican side the number rose steeply, and the dreaded *chance* of being ousted in a primary, however long the odds, now chills would-be centrists in both parties. The unintended consequences of this institution in American elections have given pause to political scientists ever since V. O. Key began calling attention to its risks some fifty years ago. Particularly where interparty competition is lacking (as in many congressional districts), the direct primary stokes the process of polarization.

So What?

When all is said and done, the developments we have reviewed to this point are only cause for serious concern if they can be demonstrated to imperil the democratic process or the prospects of attending to urgent policy priorities. That demonstration is anything but unambiguous or simple to supply.

To begin with, some of what passes for dysfunctional polarization actually may be little more than the downside of unified party control of the executive and legislative branches. Unified government—as in the first six years of the Bush presidency but also the first two of the Clinton presidency—permitted partisans to move their political agendas further to the left or right than would have been possible otherwise. Divided party control of government, on the other hand, compels accommodation. The GOP's victory in 1994, for example, pushed Clinton toward the center. If the Democrats had regained at least one chamber of Congress in 2004, the result almost certainly would have been to force Bush toward middle ground in his second term. Divided government, in short, can temper a "polarizing" president.

Whether such tempering is always for the best is debatable. (Try to picture, hypothetically, a tempered Abraham Lincoln "triangulating" with a Democratic

79. While this "primary threat" thesis is intuitively plausible, the direct evidence supporting it is mixed at best. Much rests on the extent to which incumbents act preemptively to ward off challenges that would otherwise occur. Only sophisticated interviewing can document these "nonevents." See, however, Burden (2001).

House or Senate in 1862.) Partisan polarization can have advantages, not just liabilities. Inasmuch as the Democratic and Republican parties differ more visibly, they offer voters "a choice, not an echo," to borrow Goldwater's words. There is something to be said for that clarification. Was the public philosophy of the Democrats more intelligible in the days when the party had to accommodate the likes of southern segregationists under its big tent? For years political scientists had lamented the lack of a "responsible" party system in the United States. Now, with the political parties more coherent, centralized, unified, and disciplined—in sum, a bit more reminiscent of the majoritarian style in some European parliamentary regimes—analysts and pundits rhapsodize about the days of Tweedledum and Tweedledee and their old incongruous ad hoc coalitions, deference to seniority and debilitating filibusters, weaker legislative party leadership, and often sloppy bipartisan compromises.[80]

Accountability

But what if a good deal of the public agenda is being hijacked by the polarized militants that rule the parties or, at any rate, densely populate their bases? Surely, as many critics have argued, there have been glaring episodes of this sort. The Clinton impeachment imbroglio was one. In December 1998 the House of Representatives voted to sack the president, with 98 percent of the Republican members concluding that Clinton's conduct rose to the level of high crime. But this verdict of "the people's house" did not align with the views of the people. From the eruption of the sex scandal in January 1998 through the end of the Senate trial in February 1999, every national poll showed the public opposed to impeachment and conviction, typically by margins of two to one.[81] In 2005 congressional intervention in the Terri Schiavo case provided another unsettling illustration of how Congress could lurch in one direction while lopsided majorities in public opinion polls leaned the other way.

Occasionally, the policy outcomes have seemed disconnected from prevailing public preferences in less ephemeral controversies as well. For quite a few years, passage of national energy legislation was held hostage in part by an unresolved dispute of far greater interest to strict environmentalists than to average motorists:

80. Just how cohesive and disciplined the congressional parties really are as of this writing is a very debatable matter. After Tom DeLay ceased to be the Republican majority leader, House Republicans began resembling, at crucial times, the disheveled majorities of yore—unable even to agree on a federal budget in the spring of 2006, for instance.

81. Jacobson (2000, p. 10).

namely, whether to permit exploration for oil and gas anywhere in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Similarly, a minority view presently governs stem cell research. As much as 58 percent of the public would prefer to allow research that might result in new cures for diseases than to preserve the human embryos used in the process.[82] Yet so far, the opponents have held the upper hand, limiting government-funded research only to existing cell lines from embryos that have already been destroyed.

Exhibits like these are proof perfect to many critics that the political process is now routinely out of touch and unaccountable. But is it? So sweeping a verdict remains unwarranted unless the data supporting it can be taken to scale. A much wider range of policy debates has to be parsed, including truly big-ticket items, not primarily smaller-bore questions like the Schiavo controversy or even the Clinton impeachment fracas.

A recent attempt to do just that is the engaging book *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of Democracy* by political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson. In this ambitious treatise, the authors argue that mainstream popular sentiments failed to inform, much less decide, virtually every major policy initiative of the GOP during the George W. Bush presidency.[83] According to Hacker and Pierson, for example, the prescription drug bill, Bush's energy legislation, and the proposed reform of Social Security—and more—were pushed relentlessly on a nonconsenting public.

Arguably, however, just the opposite was the case. The addition of prescription drug benefits to Medicare was a Bush campaign promise in 2000. More than anything else, its inspiration came from his strategy of "compassionate conservatism"—an effort to attract middle-of-the-road voters by co-opting the Democrats on an issue dear to them. The Bush administration's energy proposals reflected, for the most part, precisely what American consumers *really* demand—namely, continued production of low-cost energy, and no meaningful pressure to conserve it. Hacker and Pierson claim that strong majorities preferred something called "conservation."[84] But an expressed preference for that slogan signifies next to nothing. The effective method for saving fuel is a rising price, either induced by free-market forces or by taxes, both of which are inimical to most voters. Bush's

82. Pew Center for the People and the Press, "The 2004 Political Landscape: Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized," November 5, 2003 (people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=196).

83. Hacker and Pierson (2005).

84. Hacker and Pierson (2005, p. 83).

Social Security plan went nowhere, partly because it met unified resistance from the Democrats, but more fundamentally because most Americans were opposed to it.[85] As for Bush's foreign policy, the Iraq project—in fact, the president's whole approach to foreign affairs—was basically put to a referendum in the elections of 2002 and 2004. Realistically assessed, none of these initiatives turns out to have been an affront to popular sovereignty.

Gridlock?

Maybe the critique of policymaking in a polarized political environment has to take a different tack: the trouble is not that the government is out of step with the people, but that it is not getting much done in their interest, whether they like it or not.[86]

The public may not relish the hard choices that are needed to ensure the solvency or soundness of the Social Security system, but serious policymakers have to see them through anyway. The public may not welcome the pain that a genuine energy conservation plan inflicts—a stiffer excise tax on gasoline, say—but policymakers do society a disservice if they perennially chicken out. It may well be that intensely partisan politics throws up additional roadblocks to certain *un*popular measures that a responsible government ought to take for the sake of the public good in the long run. We will circle back to this important consideration shortly. Beforehand, though, we urge caution against the conventional supposition that political polarization (at least to its present extent) is necessarily a recipe for policy paralysis.

Whatever else the overall legislative record of recent years may show, sclerosis has not been a distinguishing characteristic. Reform of the welfare system, substantial tax reductions, big trade agreements, a great expansion of federal intervention in local public education, important course corrections in foreign policy, reorganization of the intelligence bureaus, a significant campaign finance law, new rules governing bankruptcy and class-action litigation, a huge new cabinet department, massive enlargement of Medicare—for better or worse, all these milestones, and others, were achieved despite polarized politics.

85. Interestingly, the Bush Social Security venture might have stirred less public skepticism if it had been sold in a stealthier manner. Bush did *not* claim that private accounts would fix the program's eventual insolvency. That bit of honesty was commendable, but it led people to wonder why the privatization was a pressing imperative in the first place. We are indebted to our Brookings colleague Peter Orszag for this insight.

86. For evidence that elite polarization leads to some forms of policy gridlock, see McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006, pp. 175–89).

Some of these exploits probably were only possible *because* of disciplined ("polarized") voting by the congressional majority party, as the work of David W. Brady and Craig Volden suggests.[87] (That was certainly true of the 2003 tax reduction bill, for example.)[88] Several, though, occurred because partisan polarities, though significant on many issues, were not consistently so dramatic and all-encompassing as to cause the wheels of government to grind to a full stop. It is not always easy, as a matter of fact, to find brilliant daylight between the official postures of the political parties.

Take the Republicans. There was a time when limited government was a distinguishing aspiration of Republican presidents and congressional leaders. That austere orientation lost allure after January 1996, with the debacle of the government shutdown. Today, big spending and big bureaucracy are hallmarks of the politically chastened GOP. Witness the party's complicity in the largest expansion of an entitlement program (the Medicare prescription drug benefit) in forty years, the profligacy of the Republican-controlled Congress on everything from highways and farm subsidies to reconstruction assistance for the Gulf states inundated by Hurricane Katrina, the king-sized Department of Homeland Security, the stiff statism of the USA Patriot Act, and the No Child Left Behind law's federal tutelage of local education policy.[89] By the time President Bush delivered his State of the Union address in January 2006, some of his themes (the nation's "addiction to oil," for example, and the need to bolster America's "competitiveness") sounded as if they had been lifted from the scripts of Democratic administrations and congressional leaders in decades past.

The Democrats, to be sure, have dissented on more than a few high-profile matters—for example, by defending the status quo for Social Security, second-guessing the Bush administration's policy on Iraq, and preferring to nationalize end-of-life rules for fetuses but not for the sources of embryonic stem cells or for patients in vegetative states. But more than is commonly acknowledged, the two

87. Brady and Volden (2006).

88. The Republican vote on this second round of Bush tax reductions was 224 to 1 in the House, and 48 to 3 in the Senate.

89. To quote Representative Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), "the material that [now] comes from the Republican caucus is not to call for the elimination of this program or that, it's to brag that we have increased the budget for education by 144 percent." See Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "The Revolution That Wasn't," *New York Times,* February 13, 2005. The 2005 transportation bill was larded with 6,000 pet projects at a cost of $286 billion. In the fall of 2005 the supposedly disciplined Republican-led House proved unable to reduce the growth in mandatory government spending by even as little as one-tenth of 1 percent.

parties also appear to have crawled toward common ground on a number of sensitive issues.

However hard it was for many Democrats to swallow, say, welfare reform or the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the mid-1990s, these once-defining disputes had cooled by the end of the decade.[90] Similarly, the crime issue, which the Republicans had exploited so effectively in the 1988 election, subsequently lost much of its partisan luster. Helpfully, crime rates declined, but also the Democrats inoculated themselves by enacting a far-reaching anti-crime bill in 1994.

In the 2004 election cycle, no serious contender for the Democratic presidential nomination campaigned to overturn the 1996 welfare law or NAFTA. For all their gripes about "tax cuts for the rich," the Democrats effectively embraced much of Bush's tax reduction. True, Senator Kerry favored bringing the top tax rate on incomes above $200,000 back up to 39.6 percent, but that would still have been a far cry from the 70 percent rate that Ronald Reagan had slashed. The Democrats fumed that, over the ensuing ten years, a $1.35 trillion deficit loomed on account of the Bush administration's fiscal policies, but Kerry's proposed tax and spending package was estimated to spill almost the same amount of red ink ($1.3 trillion).[91] Bush came out against same-sex marriages—but so did Kerry. And later, on the red-hot issue of immigration policy, key liberal Democrats such as Senator Edward M. Kennedy (of Massachusetts) sought and shared middle ground with George W. Bush.

There has been enough partisan convergence (albeit selective, tenuous, opportunistic, or episodic) to secure key pieces of legislation. Lest we forget, the 2001 tax cut would not have passed if an abundance of Democratic senators

90. The decline of various divisive issues, and the partisan convergence on some of them, has been observed by Dionne (2004, pp. 17–19), among others. Dionne notes that welfare reform was clearly one such issue for the Democrats. The earned income tax credit was one for the Republicans. Concurring with President Clinton's expansion of that program, Bush in 2000 affirmed that slowing its payments would "balance the budget on the backs of the poor." For his part, Al Gore wound up endorsing government assistance, within limits, to the work of religious charities. And the Republicans at the end of the Clinton years were proposing nearly as much federal spending on education as the Democrats.

91. Jonathan Weisman, "Kerry's Dueling Promises on Economy," *Washington Post,* August 25, 2004. The composition, of course, was different. Kerry proposed more than $770 billion in new spending over the course of the decade, Bush much less. Bush's tax cuts were estimated to reduce revenue by more than a trillion dollars; Kerry's tax plans represented about half a trillion dollars in reduced revenue. See also Robert Pear, "Two Rivals Push Domestic Plans, But Say Little of Big Price Tag," *New York Times,* October 13, 2004.

had not voted for it.[92] That fall, a total of 193 Democratic lawmakers joined 260 Republicans in embracing the Patriot Act. One hundred and twenty-nine Democrats sided with 255 Republicans to create the Homeland Security behemoth. Fifty-two Republicans voted with 246 Democrats to enact the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform. In both chambers, Republicans and Democrats voted in almost equal numbers to adopt the No Child Left Behind scheme.[93] In July 2002, the Sarbanes-Oxley rules for corporate governance were enacted almost unanimously by both chambers.[94]

Displays of bipartisanship, often yielding decidedly centrist results, have not stopped there. With enough Republican defections, majorities in both chambers declined to approve a constitutional amendment barring gay marriages.[95] The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) would not have been ratified comfortably in the summer of 2005 if eleven Democratic senators had not voted with the Republican majority.[96] A nearly unanimous Senate voted to set new limits on the interrogation of detainees suspected of terrorism.[97] Liberal interest groups and evangelicals have teamed up to lobby for projects like the Aspire Act, an antipoverty bill cosponsored by Senators Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) and Rick Santorum (R-Pa.).[98] The Republican-led House—a body alleged to be the wholly owned subsidiary of the Christian right—passed a stem cell research bill more liberal than the Bush administration's policy.[99]

92. Twelve Democrats sided with forty-six Republicans.

93. This roll call was particularly striking. In the House, 198 Democrats and 183 Republicans voted for the Bush No Child Left Behind bill. In the Senate, the bill garnered the votes of forty-three Democrats and forty-four Republicans.

94. The vote on Sarbanes-Oxley, on July 25, was unanimous in the Senate and 423 to 3 in the House.

95. In the House, for example, twenty-seven Republicans voted against the amendment with 158 Democrats and one independent. The vote fell forty-nine short of the required two-thirds for adoption. The twenty-seven GOP defections were enough to confirm that the gay-marriage ban would not come down to a neat party-line vote.

96. Reflecting the enduring residue of the NAFTA debate as well as heightened partisan divisions, however, only a handful of House Democrats supported CAFTA. Even normally pro-trade "New Democrats" voted against it in droves.

97. Forty-six Republicans, forty-three Democrats, and one independent supported the bill.

98. Ray Boshara, "Share the Ownership," *Washington Post,* February 8, 2005.

99. Fifty Republicans sided with 187 Democrats. The bill would allow stem cells to be derived from human embryos that have been donated from in vitro fertilization clinics, were created for the purposes of fertility treatments, or exceeded the clinical need of the individuals seeking such treatments.

Congress: Hell's Kitchen?

Even if the contemporary Congress has been productive, its deliberative process has not been pretty—and some prominent scholars are convinced that the sausage-making activities, if not the sausages themselves, are uglier now than they used to be. Lawmaking by "stealth," these writers submit, has become standard operating procedure, resulting in less transparency, more cooking of cost estimates and budget numbers, greater use of sleepers tucked into omnibus packages, closed rules, the drafting of legislation in oligarchic conference committees, and, in most instances, imperious exclusion of the parliamentary minority.[100]

One presumably simple gauge of the impact of heightened partisanship on congressional deliberations is a measurable increase in petulance. In floor debates, for instance, the number of words ruled either out of order or "taken down" rose after 1985.[101] The incivility is vexing, yet surely some of what Democrats regard as uncivil conduct by their congressional adversaries these days simply has to do with the Democratic Party's uncustomary minority status.[102]

Arguably, a good deal of procedural fairness has been lost in the contemporary Congress. When the Democrats were in power, they were known to stretch roll calls in the House from the customary fifteen minutes to thirty in order to marshal the votes needed to pass the party's preferred budget legislation. Republicans, including then representative Dick Cheney, deplored this practice and called it a serious abuse of power. Since 2001, however, House Republican leaders have sometimes held votes open for hours.[103] Republicans may have felt powerless in conference committees when Democrats were the ruling majority, but these days the Republican majority has gone a step further, sometimes excluding Democratic members almost entirely. Still, some of the Democrats' grievances are reminiscent of those harbored by the old House Republicans who spent professional lifetimes marginalized before 1995.[104] The parallels aside, an unfamiliar

100. See, for example, Hacker and Pierson (2005, pp. 154–55); Quirk (2005); Mann and Ornstein (2006); Sinclair (2006).

101. Jamieson and Falk (2000, p. 106).

102. Expressing the views of many Democrats, Representative David Price (D-N.C.) declared that party discipline enforced by the Republican leadership has "gone beyond its proper bounds." Quoted in David S. Broder, "The Polarization Express," *Washington Post,* December 12, 2004.

103. Norman Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, "If You Give a Congressman a Cookie," *New York Times,* January 19, 2006.

104. Connelly and Pitney (1994).

degree of majority-party cohesion, discipline, bicameral coordination, and central control is bound to beget a discontented minority.[105]

There is, of course, some irony in this situation. Unhappy Congress watchers nowadays sometimes lament the same "new" institutional practices that liberal observers fifty years ago would have welcomed. The end of the seniority system for committee chairmanships, for instance, is presently seen as regrettable. Ambitious members seeking these jobs tend to be hardliners who have ingratiated themselves with the party leadership. A half-century ago, though, the complaint among progressives was that Congress could not move priorities such as civil rights legislation because party leaders and caucuses were powerless to dislodge obstructionist southern chairmen of the House Rules Committee and the judiciary committees.

The minority in the 109th Congress, in any event, was not entirely enfeebled under the new order of things. Showing unusual solidarity, Democrats successfully thwarted Bush's Social Security plan. And in the House, the Democrats, like the Republicans, empowered their leadership to discourage dissent. Stray members inclined to work too closely with the GOP were threatened with the loss of committee seats.[106]

A crucial component of the deliberative activity of Congress is the oversight function. Congressional oversight of the executive branch has faltered in the past half-dozen years.[107] Some missteps by the intelligence agencies and bureaus charged with homeland security, for instance, might have been averted if congressional watchdogs had performed their duties more assiduously. Yet how much of this neglect can be imputed to "polarization," rather than simply the effects of unified party control of both branches, is by no means an easy call. It is inaccurate, furthermore, to portray the Republican-controlled Congress as invariably supine. Early in 2006, for example, an investigating committee of the House issued a report on the executive branch's response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster. A more blistering congressional critique of executive mismanagement in modern times would be hard to find.[108]

105. On institutional changes that have facilitated party discipline over time, see, for instance, Rohde (1991).

106. Jim VandeHei and Charles Babington, "Newly Emboldened Congress Has Dogged Bush This Year," *Washington Post,* December 23, 2005.

107. See, for instance, on this point, Sinclair (2005, p. 251).

108. U.S. House of Representatives (2006). In another indication that Congress was reaffirming its oversight responsibilities in 2006, the Senate Intelligence Committee, led by Senator Pat Roberts (R-Kans.), broke with the Bush administration's approach to its domestic eavesdropping program.

It is said that partisan polarization prevents lawmakers from adequately scrubbing, sanitizing, or simplifying their legislation. The Medicare prescription drug provisions are cited as a particularly egregious example. But how does this charge stack up against the counterfactual? Suppose the half-trillion-dollar drug bill had not been flogged by GOP powerbrokers but crafted instead in a convivial bipartisan fashion. It might well have emerged just as flawed—and almost certainly more extravagant.

Today's sorry legislative stories should be benchmarked by yesterday's. Think back to the Carter years and the convoluted National Energy Act of 1978, or further back to Lyndon Johnson and his Great Society's Community Action Program and the Model Cities law. Those enactments were legendary for their unanticipated complications and consequences.[109] It is easy, in other words, to commit what could be called the "Golden Age fallacy" about Capitol Hill. The entrenched Democratic barons who dominated the legislative branch four or five decades ago were just as capable of making a hash of congressional projects (as they did, with fatal consequences later on, in the flood planes of Louisiana, for instance).[110]

All this suggests that, at a minimum, the much-bewailed partisan divide in American politics may not have impaired the democratic policy process quite as consummately as many believe.

Four Risks

To say that the impairment has been exaggerated is not to conclude, however, that there is none at all. Increased polarization of the political parties carries at least four risks. First, it complicates the task of addressing certain long-range domestic policy problems, particularly the big ones that cannot be solved without altering the established distribution of benefits in the modern welfare state. Second, it can mar the implementation of a steady, resolute foreign policy and national security strategy. Third, partisan excesses can do lasting damage to vulnerable institutions, most notably the judiciary. Finally, there is the distinct possibility that partisan antagonisms, and especially

109. On the Community Action Program, see, for example, Moynihan (1970). On the Carter energy legislation, see Nivola (1986).

110. For an eerie reminder of this epoch and its underside, see the extraordinary account by Michael Grunwald and Susan B. Glasser, "The Slow Drowning of New Orleans," *Washington Post,* October 9, 2005.

the slash-and-burn tactics that polarized parties routinely adopt, erode public trust in government.[111]

Restructuring Entitlements: From Tall Order to Mission Impossible

The United States, like many other countries, will not be able to sustain the impending demographically induced bulge in the cost of extant social insurance programs without either rethinking them or, alternatively, imposing draconian tax increases or sacrificing a multitude of basic public obligations, starting with national defense.[112] One-party forays are ill-suited to the challenge of meaningfully addressing social entitlements. In the past dozen years, major presidential initiatives of that sort have repeatedly faltered. With no buy-in from the GOP, Clinton's proposed overhaul of the nation's health care system crashed and burned. For want of any Democratic support, Bush's effort to modify the Social Security program fared no better. If these debacles are what members of Congress have in mind when they assert "now we've got gridlock," they are right.[113]

Projects like updating Social Security or health insurance—or for that matter reforming farm subsidies, the national tax structure, and most other large, institutionalized claims on the federal fisc—tend to encounter popular skepticism and so require political cover for their proponents. Bipartisan cooperation is essential to face these daunting tasks. Inasmuch as the vendettas of polarized politicians now frustrate even the faintest semblance of bipartisan deal-making, the nation will be the worse off because of them.

When Politics No Longer Stops at the Water's Edge

The same can be said for the thankless job of U.S. international relations. Ostensibly, no great difference on foreign policy sundered the parties in the 2004 campaign. On fighting terrorism, the Democratic platform sounded stout: The government should "take all needed steps."[114] On Iraq, the Democratic

111. Based on their analysis of the interaction between increases in inequality and immigration, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) find a correlation between intensifying polarization and diminishing support for policies (such as a higher minimum wage) that supposedly reduce inequality. Along with other aspects of their carefully argued book, the assessment of this claim awaits scrutiny by other scholars with comparable methodological sophistication.

112. Rivlin and Sawhill (2004).

113. Senator James Jeffords (independent of Vermont), quoted in David von Drehle, "Political Split Is Pervasive: Clash of Cultures Is Driven by Targeted Appeals and Reinforced by Geography," *Washington Post,* April 25, 2004.

114. Democratic National Committee (2004, p. 18).

presidential candidate (in his words) was "not talking about leaving," but "about winning."[115] Scratch the surface, however, and a wide breach could be discerned. As we reported earlier, with respect to how the United States should respond to the security threats posed by rogue states and Islamic extremism, perceptions by the party bases were worlds apart.[116]

The message emanating from leading advocacy groups in Democratic circles has been that military action to oust dangerous despots and regimes that harbor terrorists is counterproductive. Here, according to Peter Beinart of the *New Republic,* was how the most prominent liberal organization, MoveOn, viewed a U.S. attack on Afghanistan after September 11: "If we retaliate by bombing Kabul and kill people oppressed by the Taliban, we become like the terrorists we oppose."[117]

The Democratic establishment, to be sure, never went that far. In the murkier dilemma of how to handle Saddam Hussein, twenty-nine Democratic senators (and the leading Democratic candidate in the 2004 race) voted with forty-eight Republicans in October 2002 to authorize the use of force. Yet the main thing to note about such glimmers of bipartisanship is their inconstancy. Three years later, with the armed forces conducting a high-stakes counterinsurgency in Iraq, Senate Democrats voted overwhelmingly to develop a timetable for withdrawing the troops.[118] It turns out, in short, that now these members *were* "talking about leaving"—and not "about winning."

The purpose of these reflections is not to side with one group or another about whether it was wise to invade Iraq or Afghanistan, or about other fateful policy determinations in the post-9/11 context. Our point is only that stability and perseverance in the pursuit of a foreign policy are as necessary in today's treacherous world as during the showdown with fascism in the 1940s and with communism afterwards. A course of action buffeted by polarized politicians, and tugged in contradictory directions, is no course whatsoever.

115. "Transcript: The First Presidential Debate," *Washington Post,* September 30, 2004.

116. In May 2005, the Pew Research Center came to this blunt conclusion: "Foreign affairs assertiveness now almost completely distinguishes Republican-oriented voters from Democratic-oriented voters. . . . In contrast, attitudes relating to religion and social issues are not nearly as important in determining party affiliation." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Beyond Red vs. Blue," May 10, 2005 (people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=242).

117. Peter Beinart, "A Fighting Faith: An Argument for a New Liberalism," *New Republic,* December 13, 2004.

118. The vote on this amendment to a 2006 appropriations bill, November 15, 2005, counted thirty-eight Democratic senators, one Republican, and one independent in favor. Only five Democrats joined the fifty-three Republicans voting "nay."

Abusing the Judiciary

There is reason to fear that if partisan contestation is unrestrained it can wreck more than decorum in the legislative branch; it could weaken other parts of the government—sensitive executive agencies and, above all, the federal bench.

A polarized Congress and its retinue of strident advocacy groups are bruising the bureaucracy and the courts in a number of ways. The new interpretation of senatorial advice and consent, seemingly held by much of the parliamentary opposition, was summed up by Senate minority leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) in 2005: "The president is not entitled to very much deference in staffing the third branch of government, the judiciary."[119] The grueling and often acrimonious process of confirming presidential appointments has increased vacancy rates in several judicial circuits.[120] Under George W. Bush, rates of confirmation for appellate court nominees have been the lowest of the past half-century.[121] Bracing for pitched battles over Supreme Court nominees, the White House repairs to stealth candidates—ones with unknown views or zipped lips. At least one recent nominee (Harriet Miers) had a paper trail so thin that her basic qualifications for the job were a mystery to many.[122]

On top of this deterioration, the nature of rhetorical assaults on the judiciary took in 2005 an inflammatory turn not heard in a long while. A member of the Senate leadership referred to one of the Supreme Court justices as "a disgrace."[123] At another point, House majority leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) threatened unspecified retribution against judges involved in the Terri Schiavo case, and declaimed that Justice Anthony Kennedy should be held "accountable" for using international law in deciding a recent death-penalty case.[124] Utterances like these signaled a degree of partisan distemper increasingly careless about the separation of powers. "Our independent judiciary is the most respected branch of our government, and the envy of the world," cautions Theodore B. Olson. It is also a delicate one, not to be trifled with.

119. *Congressional Record,* daily ed., September 20, 2005, p. S10214.

120. Binder and Maltzman (2005).

121. Sarah A. Binder, Forrest Maltzman, and Alan Murphy, "History's Verdict," *New York Times,* May 19, 2005.

122. See Stuart Taylor Jr., "Opening Argument: Does Miers Have What It Takes to Excel on the Bench?" *National Journal,* October 15, 2005.

123. Theodore B. Olson, "Lay Off Our Judiciary," *Wall Street Journal,* April 21, 2005.

124. Charles Krauthammer, "Judicial Insanity," *Washington Post,* April 22, 2005.

More Distrust

One way to regard the current state of America's political parties is that their polarization tends to alienate and exclude ordinary citizens. "Most Americans," says Fiorina, "are somewhat like the unfortunate citizens of some third-world countries who try to stay out of the crossfire while left-wing guerrillas and right-wing death squads shoot at each other."[125] But another way to view the belligerents is that they actually interest and engage *more* voters—including more of the average sort, not just fanatics of the left and right.[126]

Inclusion of the fanatics is itself a possible net benefit. Better to pitch partisan tents inclusive enough for society's keenly ideological tribes than to further radicalize them by freezing them out. As Jonathan Rauch, a Brookings guest scholar and correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly,* conjectured in a brilliant article in 2005, "On balance it is probably healthier if religious conservatives are inside the political system than if they operate as insurgents and provocateurs on the outside." When "the parties engage fierce activists" even at the risk of eclipsing some "tame centrists," Rauch concludes, "that is probably better for the social peace than the other way around."[127]

Even if the polar party system overrepresents, more than domesticates, the most fervid activists, it has not bored everybody else. The hotly contested 2004 election produced an impressive turnout, 59 percent—nearly 5 percentage points more than four years earlier. Fired-up party organizations managed to generate the remarkable increase in participation, often through old-fashioned get-out-the-vote methods (face-to-face contact between campaign workers and prospective voters) not seen on so large a scale since the heyday of the old party machines.[128] Both sides worked feverishly. The Democratic vote increased from 51 million in 2000 to 57 million. The Republican vote surged from 50.5 million to nearly 61 million. Figures of that magnitude suggest that a lot of average voters, not just those at the extremes, were successfully mobilized.[129]

125. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006, p. 8).

126. On how issue polarization helped explain the 2004 increase in voter turnout, see Abramowitz and Stone (2005).

127. Jonathan Rauch, "Bipolar Disorder," *Atlantic Monthly,* January/February 2005, p. 110.

128. Michael P. McDonald, "The Numbers Prove That 2004 May Signal More Voter Interest," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel,* November 27, 2004.

129. The figures are all the more remarkable considering the massive mobility of the U.S. population. With more than 39 million Americans changing their place of residence over the previous years, the negative implications for voter registration could have depressed turnout well below the 59 percent level.

If polarized parties are what can get 120.3 million Americans to cast ballots—the largest number in U.S. history—why worry? Because a healthy civic culture ought to do more than bestir voters; it should build their trust in the nation's political institutions. It is in this respect that, alas, querulous partisanship can become corrosive. 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.[130] The fact that bodies such as the U.S. Congress consequently operate under a cloud of public mistrust is far from ideal.[131]

Conclusions

The politics of the United States today are organized by two parties that exhibit somewhat greater clarity and cohesion than they did through most of the second half of the twentieth century. While the policy distinctions between them at the programmatic level are often a lot less bright than many onlookers like to proclaim, the distinctions are plain enough where it counts: on particular issues that motivate the opposing sets of active partisans and also bond significant blocs of ordinary voters more faithfully to one side or the other. Not only that, but the two camps are showing signs of territorial differentiation, so that the ideological proclivities in the electorate and the political geography seem increasingly entwined. In these respects, it is correct to say the nation is more polarized than it has been in roughly a generation.

To call these conditions a culture war, however, is melodramatic, a point that Morris P. Fiorina and Matthew S. Levendusky revisit in this volume. A plurality of the electorate continues to be politically moderate and unaligned. Few if any states resemble the homogeneous polities of years past (the old one-party South, for example). For every defining issue that separates Democrats from Republicans at present, there seem to be almost as many that have long ceased to be sources of discord. And certainly the contemporary "war" between the parties is, by historical standards, a mild one—particularly in comparison with the maelstroms of the nineteenth century. Then, it was not uncommon for the backers of a presidential candidate to publicly accuse a rival of being an

130. See Dionne (2004).

131. See Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, pp. 1–3); King (1997). In a more recent book, Hibbing and Thiess-Morse (2002) link public distrust to the perceived level of political controversy.

alcoholic, having a bigamist wife, or committing serial murders (to cite just a few slurs circulated by the pamphleteers for Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams in the election of 1828).[132] The tone of the current times can be disagreeable, but frankly, it sounds tame in comparison with the rants that, say, John Adams's supporters hurled at Thomas Jefferson in 1796; they would "blister the hairs off a dog's back," as Bill Clinton put it. The importance of placing today's partisanship in proper historical context is spelled out later in this book in an essay by David W. Brady of Stanford University and Hahrie C. Han of Wellesley College.

Moreover, the amount of mischief actually caused by political polarization in recent years should be kept in perspective. Mainstream voters have not stayed home in disgust in recent elections. On the contrary, they have turned out in greater numbers. True, their preferences have sometimes received short shrift amid the partisan altercations in Washington (there is no other way to describe, for example, the Clinton impeachment fight or the Bush administration's stance on stem cell research). But such departures aside, we are not persuaded that the overall supply of public policy in the current climate has been unrelated to popular demand, or that the supply has been meager.

The reasons we reach this conclusion are straightforward. For all the angst about paralytic polarization, the volume of policy items on which the parties have come to considerable consensus over the years is too often underestimated. Bipartisanship is stumbling these days, but occasionally it still happens, and continues to get some significant things done. Polarized though they are, the political parties remain locked in tight competition. Inevitably, their parity means that presidential candidates on both sides simply cannot be oblivious to voters in the malleable middle all of the time. There is just no other logical way to account for key policy initiatives such as Bush's expensive prescription drug benefit. (Yes, the legislation itself was adopted on "polarized" party-line votes. The original inspiration, though, was a calculated appeal to the electoral center.)

Parity also means that moderates in Congress, though an increasingly endangered species, retain considerable leverage. The arithmetic is elementary: no matter how polar the parties may be, an evenly divided legislature enables even a dwindling band of centrists to hold the balance of power. Clearly, the moderates have kept polarized politics from deadlocking the Senate; their pivotal role,

132. Paul Johnson, "Once upon a Time," *Wall Street Journal,* October 20, 2004.

for instance, shelved parliamentary tactics that, in the end, might have brought most legislative business to a standstill.[133]

Even with all these reassurances in mind, however, some implications of partisan polarization are sobering. We fear that the current pattern will delay, perhaps indefinitely, serious work on the fiscally exacting social programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid over the ensuing decades. Discharging that politically perilous responsibility will almost certainly call for a greater measure of bipartisan comity than has been mustered in the past dozen years. We fret, also, that sustaining a steady national security posture and foreign policy may become infeasible when partisan dissension knows no bounds. And we are uneasy with the way Washington's polemicists of both the right and left take liberties with fragile institutions such as the independent judicial branch and abet a general loss of trust in the nation's public life.

It is crucial, therefore, to gain a better understanding of how these problems arose. The rest of this volume offers some leads. E. J. Dionne Jr., a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, provides a chapter on the increasingly important impact of religious voters and groups. Diana C. Mutz, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, explores the influence of the news media. Thomas E. Mann, another veteran Brookings scholar, probes the implications of gerrymanders, primary challenges, and safe congressional seats.

Following each of these contributions (and those mentioned earlier by Fiorina and Levendusky and by Brady and Han) are commentaries by other authorities who offer additional viewpoints on the causes of polarization. Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, and Alan Wolfe of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College provide reflections on Dionne's assessment of the role of religious voters. Gregg Easterbrook, a visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution, and Thomas Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism in Washington, suggest that the media do not polarize the public as much as they reflect the polarization already present. Professor Gary C. Jacobson of the University of California, San Diego, takes up Mann's essay on the role of congressional redistricting, and Thomas B. Edsall of Columbia University discusses alternative sources of polarization.

133. We refer here, of course, to the "gang of 14's" compromise, in 2005 and 2006, on the Senate majority's so-called "nuclear option" to bar minority filibusters against Supreme Court nominees. This rule change would have triggered a countertactic by the Democratic opposition: shutting down the progress of practically all other Senate business.

Jacobson and Alan Abramowitz debate Fiorina and Levendusky's conclusion that the level of political polarization is modest in the U.S. electorate. Carl M. Cannon of the *National Journal* and James E. Campbell, a political scientist at the University of Buffalo, review Brady and Han's chapter.

From these accounts, scholars, policymakers, and interested citizens will learn more about how to locate and assess the political system's malfunctions, and what remedies might be worth considering.

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