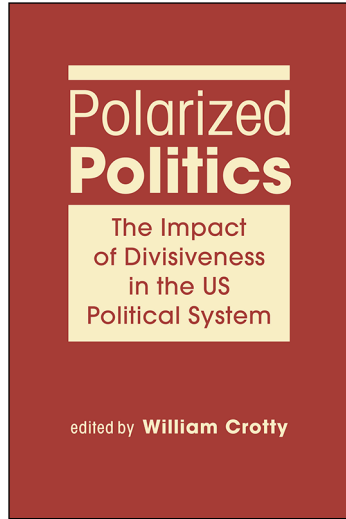


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**Polarized Politics:
The Impact of Divisiveness
in the US Political System**

edited by
William Crotty

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1800 30th Street, Suite 314
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telephone 303.444.6684
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1

Polarization in US Politics and Policy

William Crotty

Polarization is a term meant to describe the condition of hyper-partisan/ideological extremism, policy representational imbalance, and institutional paralysis that combine to make contemporary governing so problematic. It connotes a divisiveness that moves well beyond normal politics and political parties to the end points of the US ideological spectrum. The result is a dysfunctional politics, identified primarily by its rejection of reasoned compromise, the lifeblood of a democratic system. Relied on as the basis for electoral and issue decisionmaking, it can come to challenge the ability of a nation and its political institutions to effectively represent the interests of its citizenry. It responds most directly to the demands of the narrow, economically well-off strata of the population who benefit from a rejection of a mainstream political culture. The proportion of the electorate who profit from an asymmetric political discourse may be small, but the results of such actions have extraordinarily important consequences.

Polarization results in a continual loop in which the system overrepresents and responds most directly to the resources of those who have established themselves as the most economically powerful in the political culture. Those who suffer the most by the inability to address in a meaningful manner the social needs of a society tend in turn to be the mass citizenry. The dominant subgroup in the context of contemporary politics is those with the economic resources to move the nation's politics, decisively in recent decades, in the direction most beneficial to their interests.

In the United States, conditions of polarization in its politics have been present for over a generation, increasing in emotion and intensity and in effectiveness in shaping issue outcomes as the years pass. This is frequently seen as a political condition that contrasts markedly with earlier times when

partisan differences without question existed and, however firmly held, seldom came to paralyze decisionmaking. The political parties, while moving in clear left-right directions in an earlier time, had multiple factions, regional interests, social group demands, and issue factions within the coalitions. Interparty compromises became a necessity for electoral success. In a hyper-partisan/ideological age, such an ability to reach mutually satisfactory agreements, while recognizing that each side will have to give up something in the interests of a broader governance, is rare. It is, and unlike several generations earlier, not an outcome or process of decisionmaking that is prized.

There is a level of “truth” and rigidity certainly in service to an ideological master that comes to see compromise as a surrender of principle, an unacceptable voiding of the electoral bond with constituents of similar views, to an opposing belief system. As indicated, governing under such conditions makes effective representation of multiple social interests especially difficult. Such a system prizes principle above political bargaining and denigrates pragmatism as little beyond a sellout, as evidence of a moral corruption in the body politic. Pushed to the extremes, such a culture can bring into question the essence of what a democratic system is meant to stand for and how and for whom it is intended to operate.

It is necessary to understand such issues when discussing polarization. A hyper-partisan, value-driven policy calculus does benefit some, and it does so handsomely. At the same time, it is necessary to realize that polarization is not the product of some mysterious or mystical “silent hand” to be found in a society or an act of whatever god has relevance in this context. It is a planned outcome, a dynamic achieved with great effort and seemingly unlimited funding. It is one that benefits its sponsors to levels unimaginable in previous times. It is then a product of a certain type of politics, justified by a convenient and useful philosophic reasoning as to what best rewards a society and fed into the political system by the political parties. In short, polarization, however it would be explained, approached, or rationalized, is a product of self-interest, namely, economic self-interest in the US system, taken to extremes. It is best approached as a political problem, one that maximizes the resources of wealth in shaping policy outcomes and most dominantly the society’s economic reward structure. It takes advantage of a policymaking structure that is porous, open to influence at innumerable stages, and makes actions in the interests of a mass public extraordinarily difficult.

Defining Polarization

Polarization can be defined as an emphasis on extremes in the politics, partisanship, and policymaking of a society. The emphasis is on divisiveness as

seen at present, resulting in the hyper-partisanship and ideologically based conflicts that have come to dominate the nation's politics. The principle underlying the concept is easy enough to grasp. It is roughly adapted from physics and from explanation of momentum as in magnetic or electric polarity with opposing force fields moving in precisely opposing directions. The intent in politics is not to carry over the theoretical or measurement specificity to be found in science, but to supply a broad and easily understood if imprecise level of understanding to a phenomenon that has come to transcend all levels of present-day politics.

While the essential idea is clear and not a subject for debate, more open to argument is the manner in which a severely polarized politics impacts party developments and group representation in crucial areas of the society. Sorting through and assessing developments in these more critical areas of importance provides the basis for the analysis to come.

A Partisan Bent

Before addressing the topics of individual concern, there is a dynamic that needs to be mentioned in order to put in context what is to follow. It is less discussed than other aspects of polarization, but important—critical even—for appreciating exactly what has been, and continues to be, developing. There is a partisan imbalance to the polarization controversy. This is not to say that both political parties are not products of a hyper-partisan/ideological approach to political issues. They are. Each sees governing and decisions as to the distribution of the nation's resources, who benefits, who pays, and how and what is to be valued and promoted and what is not, through intense and contrasting ideological lenses. They represent different groups and interests in the society, competing for attention and dependent, whatever their claims to independence may be, on the outcomes. In these regards, both parties have moved their center of gravity over recent generations. They have undergone a process of unification of their coalitional factions around accepted value premises, in the process becoming increasingly partisan in elections and in institutional decisionmaking. Fundamental changes that have occurred in party ideological and issue cohesion have come to restructure the party system. Still, one party, the Republicans, has moved further and more emphatically to the right than the Democrats have to the left. This has had major consequences for policymaking. Polarization is substantially more of a Republican/conservative phenomenon than it is a Democratic/liberal emphasis. This becomes clear with a more intensive identification of its roots and the dynamic of the forces most active in funding the movement and gaining the most in the process from such conditions, and should be kept in mind when evaluating policy outcomes in the areas to be critiqued.

Structure of the Book

In Chapter 2, I explore the belief systems that underlie the hyper-partisan, intensely ideological politics of the current era. In Chapter 3, Walter Dean Burnham, building on his pathbreaking contributions to the understanding of political representation and its consequences, addresses issues of competitive disequilibrium, party representation, and the policy implications of both for a class-sensitive electoral order. Burnham also places the US experience in an international comparative context, making clear the distinctive upper-level tilt of election turnout and electoral decisionmaking in the United States as compared to that in other advanced democratic nations.

In Chapter 4, Arthur C. Paulson traces the evolution of the US ideological party system from the 1960s to the present—a process that he describes as the most fundamental electoral realignment in US history. His incisive analysis raises basic issues for a political system undergoing the uncertainty of a transformative era.

The ultimate focus of polarization is policymaking, and the epicenter of policymaking at the national level is to be found in Congress. Thus in Chapter 5, Thomas Ferguson offers a sharp, comprehensive analysis of the factors—primary among them “big money”—that most influence congressional decisionmaking.

In principle and seen comparatively, US governing institutions were established more to force lengthy deliberation than to effect efficient, rapid decisionmaking processes. By any standard, the US approach to policymaking is demanding and complicated. Much has changed, however, since the Constitution was written, diluting and reprogramming the original intentions of the Founders and serving to reframe the operations of the state. The result is a current institutional framework that raises the question of how far a governing system can evolve and continue to remain true to its founding values. This issue is met head-on by Gerald M. Pomper and Marc D. Weiner in Chapter 6. Their bold, thought-provoking analysis of the impact of polarized politics on a society is one of major importance for our understanding of where the nation and its representative institutions are and where they are heading.

Religion has always played an important role in the political life of the United States, typically serving as a dividing line between Republicans and Democrats. In Chapter 7, Lyman A. Kellstedt and James L. Guth provide a major reinterpretation of the reengineering of the parties along a secular/religious divide. With an emphasis on the electoral alignment over the past seventy years, they make an important contribution to our understanding of both the changes that have taken place and the severity of their impact.

The struggle for the equal recognition and political empowerment of women in the United States has been long and contentious. In a number of respects, it has broadly paralleled African Americans' post-Civil War battle

for voting rights. In Chapter 8, Barbara C. Burrell explores the ways in which gender politics is related to and has an impact on contemporary partisan polarization. Her focus is on political leadership and the recruitment and election of women to political office.

Racial polarization in politics is the subject of Chapter 9, in which I trace the evolution of controversies surrounding the social and political rights of African Americans from the Reconstruction period to the present.

In recent elections, Latino political mobilization has drawn significant attention from the political parties, and Latinos have been making use of their increasing political capital. John A. Garcia, in Chapter 10, explores two dimensions of the political world of Latinos: the extent of their electoral engagement, and their partisan affiliations, preferences, and interactions.

The subject of Chapter 11 is gay rights in the context of polarized party politics. Paul R. Brewer and Shawn C. Fettig explore how gay rights issues, such as the lifting of the ban on military service and the legal recognition of gay marriage, have emerged and evolved over time as partisan and ideological battlegrounds.

A more recent issue to enter the political arena as an area of major concern is aging. As the baby boomers reach their mid-sixties, the call for government programs to meet increasingly complex needs has become an important part of each party's electoral agenda—and brought into high relief opposing conceptions of the nature of the state. In Chapter 12, Christine L. Day develops the dimensions of that controversy and explores the often corrosive ideological orientation of the debate.

One of the intractable fault lines in US politics in recent decades has been over the adoption of a national health care plan. In Chapter 13, covering the mid-1930s to the present, Thomas R. Marshall explores when, why, and how health care became a partisan issue.

In Chapter 14, the concluding chapter of the book and admittedly a sobering one, I trace the upward redeployment of wealth in the United States and its concentration in a tiny fraction of the population. I argue that the explanations for this polarization of wealth are political and not economic, the results of a conservative, neoliberal program meant to reward the richest of Americans. The vehicle for redefining the country's economic structure has been the political parties, recipients of the substantial corporate and individual donations needed to compete effectively for public office (an "investment theory of politics"). The parties are themselves increasingly polarized, from their base in the electorate to their policy votes in Congress. The relationship creates a cycle that continues to add to the imbalance. The transference of wealth to the richest on such a massive scale raises questions as to the representative nature of the parties and the quality of representation in a mass democratic society.