Introductory Chapters

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Introduction

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The topic of political polarization dominates discussions of contemporary American politics. Commentators may mean different things by the term, but widespread agreement exists that much of the dysfunction in the U.S. political system can be blamed on or explained by polarization. The coarseness of our political discourse, the ideological distance between opposing partisans, and most of all, an inability to pass much-needed and widely supported policies all stem from the polarization in our politics.

This volume assembles several of the nation's top analysts of polarization in American politics. However, unlike the many other volumes written on this subject, this book focuses on solutions to polarization. As such, it necessarily takes these authors, who more often analyze causes and consequences than propose remedies, out of their comfort zone. Debunking conventional wisdom and warning of unintended consequences tend to be more valuable coins in the realm of political science. The professional risks usually exceed the rewards of sticking out one's neck to suggest, with admittedly incomplete information, reforms that might address the most serious policy challenges of the day. We are, therefore, very thankful for the Hewlett Foundation, which helped alter the cost-benefit calculus and supported a conference that produced the chapters for this volume.

The proposals are intentionally brief, readable, and at times, tentative. But each suggests a direction for the country to address the widely maligned claim of polarization in our politics. They range from the mundane (e.g., tweaks to campaign finance laws) to the overly ambitious (e.g., compulsory voting, proportional representation, elimination of primary elections). Recognizing that the U.S. separation-of-powers system is uniquely threatened by polarization, several authors suggest (sometimes fancifully) constitutional change. However, most of the proposals take the basics of our constitutional structure

as a given. Still, much can be done short of a constitutional amendment or convention to address the many facets of America's polarization problem.

DEFINING POLARIZATION

Before turning to solutions it is important to define the problem. Polarization, like "corruption," is quickly becoming a catchall for whatever ails American politics. For purposes of this book, three separate but interacting phenomena fall within the ambit of "polarization." The first is ideological convergence within parties and divergence between parties – what we might call "hyperpartisanship." The second, often characterized as "gridlock," refers to the inability of the system to perform basic policy-making functions due to obstructionist tactics. Third, when we speak of polarization we often mean something beyond government dysfunction: a larger cultural phenomenon of "incivility," namely the erosion of norms that historically constrained the discourse and actions of political actors or the mass public.

These phenomena interrelate, but every solution to polarization does not address all three of its manifestations. Lowering the bar for policy making by eliminating or limiting the filibuster, for example, has not brought the parties closer together or made them more civil. Similarly, changes in the electoral system aimed at increasing the number of moderate legislators will only affect the potential for gridlock if party leaders allow votes to take place in which moderates might be peeled away from the party's position. And changing the tenor of media coverage of politics – were it even possible – would not necessarily result in a kumbaya moment leading to negotiation among elites with fixed views on the size of government. A comprehensive solution to polarization may require addressing these three different manifestations, but some may be more amenable to policy intervention than others.

Hyperpartisanship

As many have argued, the current state of high ideological definition of the parties stands as an example of "be careful what you wish for" for political scientists. For decades, political scientists decried the "irresponsible" party government that characterized the parties in Congress. In particular, the Democratic coalition, consisting as it did of Southern Dixiecrats and Northern urban liberals (among others), failed to exhibit the coherence that political scientists envied about European parties in parliamentary systems, particularly Great Britain. If only the parties could be more disciplined and ideologically defined, the

argument went, then they would be more accountable to voters and perhaps more likely to pass popular legislation that otherwise could not break through the "Conservative Coalition" that controlled Congress.

Fast forward to 2014, and the complaints have shifted 180 degrees. Now, the problem is excessive ideological coherence: the parties are too well defined. Their candidates offer clear options on virtually every major area of public policy. On health care, civil rights, the environment, taxes, education, immigration, and fiscal policy, the parties and their nominees have clearly defined and opposing positions. Claims that "there's not a dime's worth of difference between the parties" ring especially hollow in recent years. (Chapter 2 by Nolan McCarty and Michael Barber, which explores the causes and consequence of polarization, discusses these developments in greater detail.)

To be more precise, several rough measures for ideological coherence need to be kept in mind. The first is the increase in party-line votes in Congress. In both parties there are fewer defectors on any given vote than there have been in recent decades. Previously viewed as a sign of party "strength," now this kind of partisan team support is seen as institutional weakness. Under conditions of divided government, such strong parties pose particular obstacles (all else equal) because the president then has fewer members of the ruling party in Congress that he or she can peel off to help enact preferred legislation.

Party-line voting does not, by itself, indicate *ideological* polarization, however. It only points to the strong bonds that exist among partisans when they are called on to be counted. In theory, at least, one party could want to cut $1 in taxes and the other $2, and a divided government could be unable to pass either bill or a compromise because of the rigidity of the parties' positions and the willingness of partisans to fall in line.

Other measures of ideological coherence focus on where party members stand on certain issues: in particular, the congruence among partisans and the ideological distance between the median party members. Not only are partisans unwilling to compromise in the current environment but also their bargaining positions are so far apart that compromise on many issues is impossible. If 100% of one party's membership wants to ban oil drilling, for example, and 100% of the other wants to increase it, not much room for bargaining exists. The more that such a dynamic – ideological similarity among co-partisans but extreme differences between opposite partisans – typifies the political landscape, the more we can say the parties are ideologically polarized. To be sure, there are some issues, such as foreign and national security policy, over which the parties in Congress are not internally coherent, but such exceptions are more atypical now than in recent decades.

Related to this point is the greater intensity of political preferences among co-partisans. Saying partisans are further apart from each other on some spectrum, either one as generic as liberal to conservative or more specific such as pro-life or pro-choice, does not necessarily suggest they feel intensely about such issues. In particular, it does not speak to the willingness of opposing partisans to bargain away their positions on certain issues in exchange for others. Under current conditions of ideological polarization, issues are perceived as life or death and opponents' positions are seen as beyond the pale. In today's Congress, it would appear that not only are the parties far apart on the issues but also that the ideological distance is matched by a widespread intensity of belief on a host of issues that might not have been seen as so fundamental and defining in previous eras. Moreover, because parties increasingly view bargains as zero sum from an electoral or political perspective, even policies that both parties support may not pass if one party has more to gain (in votes or public opinion) from a successful deal.

There is considerable debate as to whether the ideological polarization just described is limited to elites (particularly members of Congress) or extends to the mass public. At a minimum the following could be described as the modest scientific consensus on the question: (1) elites (i.e., members of Congress) *and* the mass public are more polarized now than in recent decades in that they are better sorted into parties and more consistently vote for their party's nominees and (2) the mass public is less polarized than elites, highlighted in no small measure by the fact that a sizable plurality now identify as independents. Beyond those points of consensus, scholars differ over the relative shape of the distribution of opinion of the mass public as compared to the parties in Congress. To some extent this distribution depends on the issue, because public attitudes on many "moral values" questions such as guns, abortion, and gay rights appear more bell-shaped than the distribution of preferences among elites. However, on many other issues, especially when framed exactly as the legislation that Congress considers, the mass public more closely mirrors elites.

One final point concerning hyperpartisanship: when people talk about polarization, they often mean more than just the division of the population or elites into two ideologically divergent and coherent camps. They also tend to imply that the camps are of nearly equal size. The parties are polarized, on this score, because the size of each of the two camps is roughly equal. If two-thirds of Americans (let alone legislators) were Democrats, then most would not consider our politics polarized, even if a smaller faction of Republicans was unified and extreme in its opposition. This is important to keep in mind when considering policy responses, because one could easily argue that the

best antidote to polarization is whatever measure might lead one party to have overwhelming dominance among the population and elites. Not only would it solve gridlock but it would also replace polarization with greater consensus.

Just to summarize, the notion of hyperpartisanship entails:

(1) **Coherence** – the relative lack of internal divisions within each party
(2) **Divergence** – the ideological distance between median party members
(3) **Intensity** – the fact that partisans are not only far apart but they also care enough about their positions that they are less willing to budge
(4) **Parity** – the political parties are of roughly equal strength

Gridlock

The U.S. Constitution is designed to disperse power and to make policy making difficult. Fear of concentrated authority was a natural consequence of our particular colonial origins, as well as a common theme for much of the political conflict throughout U.S. history. Even under conditions of political harmony, the structural features of the Constitution (such as checks and balances, bicameralism, federalism) exist as considerable obstacles to policy making not seen in most other democracies.

Under conditions of divided government in a separation-of-powers system, however, hyperpartisanship can lead to gridlock. Unlike a Westminster-style parliamentary government, in which party-line voting is key to execution of the government's agenda, party-line voting in the U.S. Congress can prevent an opposing president from executing his or her agenda. For much of the last century, this did not pose a problem. Even when we had divided government, the porousness of the parties in Congress and their decentralized power structure allowed presidents to make deals with members of the other party. When the party controlling Congress is unified and power is concentrated, the opposing president is less able to peel apart the opposing party coalition to get votes on his or her preferred policy.

A cohesive party can cause gridlock even when it does not control Congress, of course. Control of either house or of a sizable share of the Senate can enable a unified party to obstruct policies supported by a majority. Many additional veto points exist in the Senate (e.g., filibuster, holds, blue slip process) that allow for obstruction by a minority or even an individual senator. As described in the next subsection, several of these avenues for obstruction, reserved for extraordinary circumstances in the past, are now part of ordinary politics.

The willingness to use both ordinary and extraordinary tactics to prevent government from performing its most basic functions constitutes the most

troubling manifestation of polarization. Budget stalemates and resulting government shutdowns are really the least of it, because those tactics might be seen as anticipated by the separation of powers in the Constitution. In many respects the formal constitutional barriers to policy making seem less threatening than exploitation of extra-constitutional rules, such as the filibuster, senatorial holds on nominees, and, most devastating on this score, the threat of debt default.

At the same time, persistent gridlock makes alternative modes of policy making more attractive by shifting power away from Congress and toward the president and courts. Holds and filibusters of executive branch appointments lead to recess appointments or delegations of power to officials not requiring Senate confirmation. Similarly, the inability to get policy through Congress leads presidents to engage in unilateral action through executive orders, deliberate decisions not to enforce the law, and other similar tactics. Courts in such an environment also gain tremendous power, because their decisions interpreting or modifying statutes will often become the final word, with a Congress and a president unable to overturn them.

Incivility and the Erosion of Politics-Constraining Norms

Hyperpartisanship and gridlock refer to measurable political phenomena, but incivility is the aspect of polarization that truly lies in the eye of the beholder. The term loosely indicates "meanness," but in that sense, it would be hard to assess the relative kindness of today's politicians to those of yesteryear. (How does Congressman Joe Wilson's shout of "You lie" to President Obama in his State of the Union address compare, for example, to the dueling of Hamilton and Burr or the caning of Charles Sumner on the floor of the House of Representatives?) In a larger sense, though, the incivility distinctive to today's politics comes from the erosion of norms that historically constrained political discourse and action. This incivility is not limited to policy elites, of course, but may be more broadly shared among the mass media and public.

The ingredients to this incivility are varied. The ideological distance between partisans is mirrored, some argue, by differences in psychology and the tendency even to believe different politically relevant facts (e.g., the human causes of global warming, the existence of WMDs in Iraq, the birthplace of the president). Some of this is the result of the different media echo chambers in which the partisans exist on cable news, talk radio, and the internet. In such an environment both conspiracy theories and incendiary rhetoric can fester and thrive.

The claim of declining civility extends beyond the Rush Limbaughs and Bill Mahers of the world, however. Campaigns themselves, the argument goes,

have become nastier. Here, too, we may be suffering from a selective amnesia about the past – think of the "Daisy" or "Willie Horton" ads, for example. Yet the rise of unaccountable, sometimes unknowable outside groups (such as SuperPACs or 501(c)(4) organizations) as major forces in campaigns has removed some of the transparency and associated deterrence that previously may have chilled the most extreme campaign tactics. Candidates and parties that may have previously suffered from going "a bit too far" can now rely on outside groups to do the dirty work for them.

The dissolution of boundaries for what counts as acceptable rhetoric in politics and campaigns is just one way to measure civility, however. Indeed, uncivil language, hardly unique to contemporary politics, is more a species of the larger phenomena of the erosion of norms that previously constrained politics. Or perhaps more specifically, incivility always had its place, but now has become commonplace.

The erosion of other politics-constraining norms illustrates how actions previously considered "nuclear" have become conventional. Take recall elections, for example. Since its birth in the Progressive Era, the recall has been reserved (in theory) for the most egregious of violations of an officeholder's duties (i.e., ones that could not wait for the curing effect of a regularly scheduled election). Since the successful recall of California governor Gray Davis in 2003, however, the practice has become routine. Since then, we have seen attempts to recall Wisconsin governor Scott Walker; state legislators in Wisconsin, Colorado, Arizona, and Michigan; and Iowa's Supreme Court Justices. In fact, according to Joshua Spivak, who writes the *Recall Elections Blog*, more than 168 recall elections occurred in 2012, leading to the removal or resignation of 108 local or state officials.

The rise of the recall is but one example of the larger trend of using extraordinary electoral mechanisms for ordinary politics. The mid-decade redistricting in Texas, Georgia, and Colorado are other examples. Legislatures had always had the power to redraw lines at times other than following a census (and some exercised it to cure technical defects in existing plans or for other non-political reasons). But never before had they done so for expressly political reasons. The Texas re-redistricting also engendered its own form of extraordinary norm-breaking, now repeated elsewhere and in different contexts, of legislators leaving the state to prevent a quorum necessary for the legislature to conduct business.

The examples of innovative tinkering with electoral machinery do not end there. The recent spate of laws, passed on party-line votes, to require photo ID at the polls, shorten periods of early voting, or restrict the activities of outside groups attempting to register voters also reflect an erosion in norms as to whether and on what grounds rules of the electoral game should be

changed. Indeed, all of these changes, as well as much worse and more explicit efforts at disenfranchisement or outright fraud, have been tried before, as with Dixiecrat legislatures during Jim Crow. (And, for that matter, many of these recent changes could be justified, had they been passed with bipartisan support and different motives, on good-government grounds.) However, their normalized use as a tool in partisan warfare is of relatively recent vintage and is emblematic of the polarization in American politics.

Republicans and Democrats will argue as to when this erosion of politics-constraining norms began. Republicans point to the famous 1984 "Bloody Eighth" congressional district recount controversy, in which a Democratic-controlled Congress determined the victor in a hotly contested congressional election, or perhaps to the rejection of Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork. Democrats might point to the impeachment of President Clinton or perhaps *Bush* v. *Gore*. Whatever the beginning, no one can doubt that this erosion has accelerated in the last decade. Tactics once reserved for worst case scenarios or last resorts are now considered fair game for normal politics.

In Chapter 3 in this volume, Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson warn, however, that a tendency to blame both parties for polarization fails to describe accurately the polarization problem and, worse still, could lead to wrong-headed and counterproductive reform proposals. They argue that Republicans disproportionately engage in the "constitutional hardball" tactics described earlier and that the ideological distancing of the parties has been principally due to the rightward drift of Republicans. The "polarization problem" is, therefore, really a Republican extremism problem, they maintain, and proposals to correct it will be doomed from the start unless they recognize the asymmetry in political polarization.

ADDRESSING POLARIZATION

The chapters in this volume provide a diverse array of proposals to address, manage, or partially solve the various aspects of political polarization described earlier. Some focus on electoral reforms intended to facilitate the election of moderates, others on the need to strengthen political parties, and still others on the ways to lower the barriers to policy making. None of the chapters claims to have the magic bullet to solve America's "polarization problem." Each, however, proposes interventions that might help tame the excesses of the polarized political system or otherwise mitigate the effects of hyperpartisanship, gridlock, and incivility.

The absence of a magic bullet should not be surprising given the long-run historical forces that have given rise to our current situation. Nolan McCarty and Michael Barber describe in Chapter 2 how long-term social