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978-1-107-11416-6 - American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization

Edited by James A. Thurber And Antoine Yoshinaka

Excerpt

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Introduction

James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka

Partisan polarization among the public, activists, and elected officials characterizes American politics in the twenty-first century, and it is often seen as the major source of our governing problems (Schaffner 2011, Persily 2015). Republicans and Democrats are further apart ideologically than at any point in recent history, expressing highly negative views of the opposing party (Doherty 2014). The deleterious impact of partisan polarization cannot be exaggerated. It discourages compromise, produces gridlock, fosters mistrust, and ultimately hinders the functioning of governmental institutions. Lawmaking, representing, overseeing, executing laws, and adjudicating legal and constitutional disputes requires that individuals who might otherwise disagree come together and serve interests that go beyond their own. Failure to compromise results in gridlock, dysfunction, and partisan warfare. To paraphrase former House Speaker Sam Rayburn, we are not going along, let alone getting along!

It was not always thus. In fact, during much of the twentieth century, our national parties did not exhibit this sort of intense partisan polarization that we have seen emerge over the last generation or so. To understand how we got to where we are today, we must account for the rapid partisan change that the U.S. South has witnessed over the latter half of the twentieth century. Long gone are the days of the conservative southern Democrats (Dixiecrats) holding a more liberal northern caucus in check. Largely as a response to federal intervention in the civil rights arena, conservative southern Democratic voters started to migrate toward the GOP in the mid-1960s. Today's southern conservatives are well ensconced within the Republican Party. Southern Democrats in 2014 are largely liberal and nonwhite. The South has realigned politically. A similar, if not somewhat less acute, change occurred in reverse in other parts of the country such as the northeastern and the far west of the United States. With large swaths of the country realigning into one or the other party, each party's coalition has become much more homogeneous ideologically and in terms of

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policy preferences. To be liberal in 2014 is to be a Democrat; the same goes for conservatives and Republicans. Battles over the scope and size of the federal government have produced a wide policy schism between parties.

WHY WRITE THIS BOOK?

Although it is true that the literature on gridlock and polarization is extensive, it is also the case that it is quite disparate. What we wanted to present in this volume was the latest research encompassing the various strands in the literature into a single book that not only synthesizes our understanding of gridlock and polarization, but also pushes it forward with new questions, new data, and new answers. The book examines polarization among the American public (voters and non-voters), national and state political elites (Supreme Court Justices, legislators, executives, and party activists), and the media. Contributors are well-known scholars who have published extensively on topics related to polarization in government institutions, elections, public opinion, the media, and state politics.

The publication of this book coincides with a 114th Congress that pits a Republican House and Senate against a Democratic president entering his last two years in the White House. It follows the 113th Congress, which was one of the least productive in recent history in terms of total laws passed. As our federal government struggles to enact solutions to foreign, economic, and social problems that face the country, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of how polarization came to be, what contributed to its rise, and some of the reforms proposed to curb it. We posit that a government that fails to find solutions to broad-based issues, especially when majorities or intense minorities favor such solutions, deserves close scrutiny. It may be the case that conservatives often prefer to see non-governmental (e.g., market-based) solutions to societal problems, but the fact remains that a vast number of policies (or repeal thereof) advocated by those who generally identify as conservatives still require government to act: tax cuts, reforming pension schemes, or curbing the power of public sector unions are all examples of policies espoused by conservatives that require government action. Thus, our claim that polarization is a source of gridlock does not necessarily privilege one view of the role of government (e.g., liberal) over another (e.g., conservative).

American Gridlock could not be timelier, with the recent rise of the Tea Party as a block of recalcitrant lawmakers especially loathe to compromise, the slow disappearance of Democratic Party “Blue Dogs,” the challenges of Barack Obama’s presidency with split congressional chamber or divided party government since 2011 (Thurber 2011, 2013), many states that experience some of the same dysfunction we observe at the federal level, and a media landscape that continues to polarize. As Frances Lee (2009) points out in her excellent treatment of partisanship, what we see nowadays is the rise of

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teamsmanship, where beating the other side becomes the most important outcome regardless of the actual content of the proposals.

The 2014 Republican sweep of Congress, governorships, and state legislatures reveal some electoral foundations of partisan change. The South continues to realign, to be solid Republican territory (leading the Republican Party to become a Southern-based party), Democrats are making inroads in states with a large and increasing Latino population, and the political makeup of suburbs and exurbs continues to evolve. Nationally voters are “sorting” themselves into one party or the other based upon residential choice, their ethnicity, opinions, and values as shown most recently in the 2014 election (Balz 2014). Fiorina (2011) and Levendusky (2009) define “sorting” as the process by which a tighter fit is brought about between political ideology and party affiliation – something that continued in 2014. These trends are likely to persist and contribute to a growing divide between the parties. After the 2014 elections, Democrats have the lowest number of U.S. House seats, state legislative seats, and are tied for the lowest number of U.S. Senate seats since 1928. Republicans won 57 percent of all House districts in 2014, up from 54 percent in 2012, but measured by land area, House Republicans will represent 86 percent of the nation revealing a sustained political sort.

This book centers on the questions of voter, activist, and elite partisan change and polarization at the national level, the state level, and the media. By providing the latest research on the foundation, character, and impact of polarization the volume helps to better explain the functioning of democracy in the contemporary United States.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT POLARIZATION?

Polarization is a multifaceted phenomenon, yet much of the scholarship tends to examine only one aspect of it, which produces an extensive but somewhat disjointed literature. For instance, recent books by Barbara Sinclair (*Party Wars*, 2006), Sean Theriault (*The Gingrich Senators*, 2013), and Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (*The Broken Branch*, 2006, and *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, 2013), all superb contributions, are focused almost exclusively on the U.S. Congress (see also Lee 2009; Oleszek 2014). Other studies such as the important works of Morris Fiorina (*Culture War*, 2006, and *Disconnect*, 2011), Alan Abramowitz (*The Disappearing Center*, 2011), and Matthew Levendusky (*The Partisan Sort*, 2009) are concerned with polarization – or lack thereof (Fiorina 2014) – among the general public.

Galston and Nivola (2006, 2008) show that the U.S. Congress is more ideologically polarized than a generation ago and that the rise of “safe” districts in the House of Representatives has resulted in the movement of Representatives to the ideological poles with fewer and fewer moderates in the middle. They also show that the gap between activists in both parties has widened in recent decades. They also maintain that the technological and

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regulatory changes in the past two decades resulted in a more politicized mass media. Additionally, political activists, the most ideologically oriented Americans, are making their voices heard through greater participation in every stage of the political process. A Pew Research Center survey in 2014 found that self-reported voting rates are higher among those on the right than the left, but higher among those on the left than in the middle (Doherty 2014). Campaign donations are roughly double the national average among ideologically consistent liberals (31 percent have donated money) and conservatives (26 percent).

Polarization in the media is the central concern of Markus Prior (*Post-Broadcast Democracy*, 2007) and Matthew Levendusky (*How Partisan Media Polarize America*, 2013), while books such as those by Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (*Off Center*, 2005), Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal (*Polarized America*, 2006), and Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher (*Polarized Politics*, 2000) look primarily to the federal government for evidence of polarization.

With this extensive literature, perhaps writing this book would have been “a great idea 10 years ago,” as a fellow political scientist reacted when we began this project. We disagree. We contend that by bringing together these various strands of scholarship – and more – in a single volume, *American Gridlock* will set itself apart from similar efforts that led to the publication of edited volumes on polarization (Frisch and Kelly 2013; Nivola and Brady 2006, 2008). *American Gridlock* makes significant empirical and theoretical contributions and advances in explaining ideological polarization in the Obama presidency, debt-limit debates, government shutdowns, immigration policy deadlock, conflict over the Affordable Care Act, partisan cable news, voter sorting, change in campaign finance, and party activist strategies. In short, this volume showcases the state of the art in the scholarship on partisan polarization, and it does so from multiple vantage points. And it does so with the most recent data, including data that were simply not available a decade ago (e.g., data on redistricting or state legislators). For example, we bring scholarship on state-level polarization into the broader conversation on polarization and gridlock.

POLARIZATION AND GRIDLOCK ON MAJOR POLICY ISSUES

While we have an academic interest in the study of polarization and gridlock, much of the popular discontent with our political leaders stem from various policy episodes that highlighted the wide gulf that separates the two parties on many important policy questions. For example, Republican concerns over the public debt, growing unfunded social programs, taxes, the increasing number of illegal immigrants, the role of the federal government in education, and the appropriate size of the federal government generally versus Democratic concerns about declining social mobility, stagnant wages, increasing inequality, global warming, the role of the federal government in improving education, and justice for immigrants have driven conflict and polarization between the two parties.

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A prime example of this is the continued war over the budget and the debt. Partisan battles over the federal budget over the last 20 years are a prime example of the fundamental policy differences between the parties. Bipartisanship is rare if not nonexistent in Washington when it comes to tax increases and cuts in popular domestic programs. Both are needed to reduce the deficit and the debt, but the parties have taken increasingly extreme positions on their willingness to compromise on taxes and means testing in social programs. For example, a primary reason for the failure of the so-called supercommittee that was created in August 2011 to address the federal debt and deficits is the wide ideological gap between the two parties in the House and Senate. The supercommittee members could not bridge their ideological differences and find a common ground because of basic philosophical differences between the two parties. There is little common ground with regard to the primary issue of the size of the federal government and the revenues needed to pay for existing government programs. Mainstream Democrats believe government should play an important role in the economy and provide a safety net for the disadvantaged. They also want high-income people to pay more taxes to fund those programs. A majority of Republicans disagree. They want to limit government's many domestic administrative actions, characterizing a wide range of regulations as interference in markets. They disagree with many social safety net programs and they believe taxes are too high. They promise smaller government and no new taxes while cutting the deficit and reducing the debt. There is little chance that members of Congress can agree to compromise or ever get the votes from their party members to bridge that size-of-government chasm.

The ideological divide is most evident in the battle over the budget with Republicans' refusal to shift or fudge their no-tax pledge and Democrats' insistence on tying spending cuts to tax hikes. In the end, the basic policy divide is almost certainly the biggest single factor influencing the failure of passing a budget and appropriations on time. As long as the GOP leadership remains trapped in its commitment to never raise taxes, there will be no serious fiscal agreement. And any Republican who dared to stick his head out of the no-new-tax foxhole and hint at a willingness to consider revenues has been and will be barraged with friendly fire. It seems that Democrats are never going to agree to cuts in Medicare and Medicaid without significant GOP concessions on taxes. However, with enough political cover from President Obama, Democrats might reluctantly move on those entitlements in exchange for some new revenues, but as the 2016 election (as with the pre-election gridlock in the past) nears, Democrats' unwillingness to take on their own base over major federal spending programs only grows. This estrangement of the Democrats on the left and the Republicans on the right has spread like a contagion into many other narrow to broad policies from the Keystone XL Pipeline to the Affordable Care Act, immigration, investment in infrastructure, to most of the Obama programs passed in his first two years in office.

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One of the most highly politicized policies is immigration reform. The intense partisan battles over immigration policy since the mid-1980s is another major example of the wide policy chasm between the two parties. Policy proposals to maintain or increase legal immigration while decreasing illegal immigration through enhanced border security have become a fundamental division between Democrats and Republicans. Each year seems to produce even greater partisan rancor. Illegal immigration is a highly controversial issue that divides the parties with proponents (primarily Republicans) of greater immigration enforcement arguing that illegal immigrants cost Americans jobs, cost taxpayers billions in social services, and jeopardize the safety of law enforcement officials and citizens along the Mexican border. Democrats would like to establish a “pathway to citizenship” for law abiding undocumented workers in the United States. “Standards for Immigration Reform” announced in January 2014 by congressional Republicans favor stepwise implementation (rather than a package approach) with border security and interior enforcement preceding “a pathway to citizenship” to legal status. These examples are indicative of the broad partisan differences between the parties.

The most recent major immigration reform enacted in the United States, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, made it illegal to hire or recruit illegal immigrants, but left the immigration system without a key component: a workable nonimmigrant visa system program for lesser-skilled workers to enter the United States. Following this 1986 law, almost 12 million undocumented workers came across the U.S. border. It was estimated that this undocumented workforce made up about five percent of the U.S. workforce. It was also estimated that about 70 percent of those undocumented workers were from the country of Mexico.

Comprehensive immigration reform had some bipartisan support in 2001 when President George W. Bush and the leadership of both parties of Congress were ready to pass significant immigration reform legislation. The immigration reform Bush proposed was put on hold after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the two parties split on their approach to immigration reform. Immigration reform then became a hot partisan topic when President Barack Obama signaled interest in beginning a discussion on comprehensive immigration reform again in 2009. Obama’s proposed comprehensive immigration reform plan had as one of its goals bipartisan support, but it failed because it could not bridge the widening divide between the parties. Republicans moved to the right (more security on the border with Mexico and expulsion of undocumented workers) and Democrats moved to the left (with a proposal for a clear path to legal citizenship for undocumented people in the United States).

Policy gridlock continues to evolve. The policy landscape has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Whether it is the budget, annual appropriations, health care reform, immigration reform, carbon emissions, reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child

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Left Behind), or foreign policy (what to do about Ukraine, Syria, ISIS, and Afghanistan, for instance), the parties continue to diverge. They are representing constituencies that view the world through very different policy, ideological, and partisan lenses. These differences are helping to drive conflict, polarization, and gridlock between the two parties at the national and state level.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The book is organized around five areas of research, Part I: Polarization among Voters and Activists; Part II: Polarization in National Institutions; Part III: Polarization in the States; Part IV: Polarization in the Media; and Part V: Implications and Conclusions. Recent advances in data collection and advanced statistical analysis, as well as multiple reforms of the redistricting process and primary elections are allowing scholars in this book to disentangle various explanations for extreme partisanship and present new explanations about the sources and impact of polarization. The book brings greater theoretical and empirical breadth and integration to the polarization literature by moving beyond a singular focus on Congress or the federal government to the judiciary, states, voters, activists, and the media.

Thomas E. Mann’s summary of the state of polarization in 2004 has not changed significantly in the last decade:

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). (2004: 16)

This volume’s Foreword by Mann can be viewed as a summary of the current state of polarization in U.S. politics and public policymaking (see also Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Mann and Ornstein 2006, 2013, 2014). Mann argues that the parties in Congress and voters are more polarized than at any time in history, setting the foundation for the studies in this volume. Citing authors in *American Gridlock*, Mann describes how political polarization developed over decades from ideological thinkers and political activists with policy demands. He argues that the contemporary Congress bears little resemblance to the “textbook Congress” or “the reform Congress” that followed it (Mann and Ornstein 2006, 2013; Oleszek 2014). Parties are the key actors, and they respond more to their activist bases than to the median voter. This coincided with record lows in the public approval of the performance of Congress and public trust in government to respond to public needs. Mann concludes that the current Congress has ceased to operate as an effective legislative body with deliberation and

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compromise being supplanted by conflict and gridlock (Thurber 2013). His is quite the indictment.

Part I of the volume tackles the question of polarization among voters and activists. Chapter 1, “The New American Electorate: Partisan, Sorted, and Polarized,” by Alan I. Abramowitz, considers the abundant evidence that the United States has entered a new era of electoral competition characterized by a closely divided electorate at the national level and one-party dominance in most state and congressional districts with a high degree of consistency in the outcomes of elections over time and across different types of election. Long gone are the days of large inter-election swings. The 2014 election adds more confirming evidence for his generalization. Abramowitz focuses on how party loyalty and straight-ticket voting have reached record levels, reflecting the growing strength of partisanship within the American electorate. He concludes that these trends are based upon a growing divergence between Democratic and Republican coalitions along racial, cultural, and ideological lines (Abramowitz 2011, 2012).

What can be done to reduce this divide? Among the frequently cited causes for polarization is the redistricting process of drawing district boundaries following each decennial census (and sometimes in-between censuses). Chapter 2, “Redistricting and Polarization,” by Micah Altman and Michael McDonald discusses how the ideological polarization of members of the U.S. House of Representatives is affected by the sorting of incumbents into more ideologically compatible districts, the replacement of incumbents by more ideologically extreme successors, and the drawing of more ideologically extreme districts. States are responsible for drawing House of Representatives district boundary lines, and because in most states politicians are in charge of the process, it can create an obvious conflict of interest. The authors show that there are fewer competitive congressional districts following redistricting. They go beyond the extant literature by introducing a series of innovative public mapping projects that demonstrate how district maps can be drawn to foster competition without sacrificing other values, such as compactness or minority representation. However, they conclude that the prospects for redistricting reform are very limited.

Voters are not the only ones being polarized. David Karol argues in Chapter 3, “Party Activists, Interest Groups, and Polarization in American Politics” that partisan polarization cannot be understood without attention to the role of both activists and party-aligned interest groups whose policy preferences are both shaped by and shape the behavior of elected officials. This story thus goes beyond voters and elected officials. Activists and party-aligned interest groups advance their policy goals via candidate selection and the lobbying of elected officials. Activists and well-organized interest groups take cues from politicians, but their actions also reinforce and contribute to polarization in important ways. Karol shows that the polarization of Democrats and Republicans reflects the incorporation of new groups in each party’s

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coalition since the 1970s. Karol finds that polarization is visible in many aspects of American politics from Congress, to the courts to state legislatures and the electorate, a common theme found among many chapters in this volume. The shared factor linking all of these settings is political parties. Political parties, unlike the elected branches of government or even the electorate, are not well-bounded entities. They consist of activists and groups, often with no formal role or place on the organization chart, but they play important roles in parties and polarization, as shown, for instance, by the Tea party movement.

Chapter 4, “Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics, Still?” by Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, argues that a personality-based, authoritarian-non-authoritarian, divide continues to structure party conflict and polarization in America. Theirs is, therefore, an argument for a psychological basis to partisan polarization, which centers on the worldview of voters as a major explanation. They argue that Barack Obama’s ascendancy to the presidency has deepened the divide they identified as emerging in the early 2000s (Hetherington and Weiler 2009). The issue agenda, which is central to understanding personality-based polarization, has evolved in ways that have also deepened the divide, particularly with the emergence of immigration reform as a central concern. They note that the Tea Party represents the clearest embodiment of the authoritarian politics that defines the current political right, pushing a substantive issue agenda but also eliciting deeper-seated emotions about order and change in American politics. The authors maintain that politics have increasingly become organized around a fundamental “worldview/personality divide,” with preferences on the most important issues of the day, such as race, feminism, immigration, gay rights, and the proper responses to terrorism, all, in large measure, driven by the same worldview/personality.

Closing Part I of the book and taking a different stance on the polarization of voters, Samuel J. Abrams and Morris P. Fiorina, in Chapter 5, “Party Sorting: The Foundations of Polarized Politics,” contend that whether one looks at partisan, ideological, or issue cleavages, the American electorate shows no evidence of polarization – the middle has not shrunk. Rather, the American electorate has sorted, which has made political parties more internally homogeneous and more distinct from each other. Party sorting increases inter-party conflict and makes cross-party compromise more difficult, establishing the foundation of polarization and gridlock. They support their argument with data spanning the last 40 years.

The focus of Part II of the volume turns to our national institutions: the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court. Chapter 6, “Presidential-Congressional Relations in an Era of Polarized Parties and a 60-Vote Senate,” by Jon R. Bond, Richard Fleisher, and Jeffrey E. Cohen, provides clear evidence that party control of Congress is the strongest determinant of presidential success. Majority party presidents win more roll call votes than do minority party presidents (Thurber 2011, 2013). Until recently, the effects of party

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control were similar in both chambers; however, that authors show that rising party polarization in Congress affects presidential success differently in the House and Senate. In the House, party polarization amplifies the effects of party control – as party polarization increases, majority party presidents win more and minority presidents win less. In the Senate, however, party polarization suppresses success rates. Still, majority presidents win more on average, but as party voting increases, success rates decline for both majority and minority presidents. They show that the increase in Senate cloture votes and the emergence of the minority party filibuster during the Bush and Obama presidencies is responsible for the changes they find in how party polarization conditions the effects of party control in the Senate (Theriault 2013). For instance, on non-cloture votes, the effect of polarization on presidential success rate in the Senate resembles that which they find in the House. This clearly shows the importance of institutional rules in the relationship between Congress and the president.

The 60-vote Senate is the subject of Chapter 7, “Party Warriors: The Ugly Side of Party Polarization in Congress” by Sean M. Theriault. The author makes a conceptual argument pertaining to the various dimensions to gridlock and conflict. All too often, these are treated as one and the same and fall under the topic of party polarization (Baker 2015). Theriault maintains that another dimension to party polarization is distinct from it and is in many ways a better term for our current situation. Theriault calls it “party warfare.” The concepts are related, but he maintains that their distinction is critical to understanding the current congressional dynamics. Some legislators are simply “at war,” and their opposition doesn’t always stem from ideological differences; they are there to fight and win. He shows that the number of roll call votes caused by senators’ amendments gives an insight into partisan warfare in the U.S. Senate and reveals a second dimension of party polarization.

In Chapter 8, “The Sources and Consequences of Polarization in the U.S. Supreme Court,” Brandon L. Bartels examines polarization in the U.S. Supreme Court, primarily from the post-New Deal era to the present. He reveals how the ideological center on the Court has gradually shrunk over time and analyzes the sources and consequences of this trend. Polarization in the Supreme Court has generally increased over time, though this trend has ebbed and flowed. The most robust center existed during the Burger Court of the mid to late 1970s, consisting of arguably five swing justices. Bartels shows that while the center has shrunk over time on the Court, it still exists due to (1) presidents from Truman to George H.W. Bush not placing exclusive emphasis on ideological compatibility and reliability when appointing justices, (2) an increase in the incidence of divided government, and (3) the rarity of strategic retirements by the justices. Since President Clinton took office, the norms have shifted to strategic retirements by the justices and presidents placing near exclusive emphasis on ideological compatibility and reliability in the