A house dividing

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American government is struggling—maybe even failing—and the main difficulty appears to be the polarization of party politics. Far more than in most periods, thoughtful observers now question whether the political system can deal competently and responsibly with major challenges facing the country. Polarized conflict is implicated in disappointing performance on many matters, but the central source of concern has been the prolonged inability of policymakers to control the massive fiscal imbalances that threaten the nation with a diminished future. In turn, the most apparent cause of that failure has been the remarkably severe ideological conflict between Democratic and Republican office-holders in Washington—or, in short, polarized politics.

In a nutshell, Democrats refuse to cut domestic spending; Republicans refuse to raise taxes. In addition, both parties occasionally go along, at least in large numbers, with popular budget-busting measures sponsored by the other party. Government debt has ballooned. At this writing, a crucial issue is whether Congress will even be able to increase the debt ceiling to permit the Treasury to pay the obligations the country already has incurred and avoid default. In view of the apparently intractable persistence of these patterns, the long era of American prosperity and influence in the world may be drawing to a close.

Intense conflict between political parties is of course the norm in parliamentary democracies. But an excess of such conflict—or even of cohesion within each party, for that matter—undermines the logic of the American constitutional system. Indeed, an observer of contemporary American politics, reflecting on the Framers’ plan, and their hopes to avoid divisive partisanship, might wonder about their vaunted reputation for wisdom and foresight. On what grounds did the Framers think that extreme partisan conflict could be avoided? Were they just lucky that it was in fact largely avoided most of the time for some 200 years? How did the Framers think that a system of Separation of Powers, with multiple opportunities to block action, would function adequately if severe partisan conflict did develop?

The observer might wonder further: Given the giant miscalculation—and conditions of party politics now clearly at odds with the needs of the constitutional system—is the country cooked? Is there a way out of the mess? Appropriately, a sizable political science literature addresses various aspects of polarized politics. There are several major questions, although they have not received equal attention:

1) What causes polarized partisan conflict, at both the mass and elite levels? How did it begin and intensify, and what processes sustain it?

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1 I am grateful to Nicol Rae for making several suggestions that helped me improve this essay.
2) How does polarized partisan conflict affect the performance of government, including both the operation of political institutions and policy outcomes? Does it undermine effective government?

3) Is polarized conflict now a permanent feature of American politics? Or is it a temporary condition—perhaps part of a cyclical pattern or even an aberration?

4) Are there plausible institutional or other means to moderate polarization? Which is the more workable course: Adopt reforms to reduce polarization? Adjust policymaking institutions to work better in a polarized environment? Or continue to muddle through with a poor match between the party system and policymaking institutions?

The most extensive inquiries have focused primarily on the origins and causes of polarization, with lesser attention to its effects on performance. Political scientists generally refrain from devoting serious effort to making forecasts or offering advice about institutions. The four books under review make important contributions to understanding the phenomenon. Yet, taken together, they also leave key issues unresolved.

**Origins and Development: Of Chickens and Eggs**

There is a presumptive reciprocal relation between polarization at the elite and the mass levels. Elected officials of each party take strong ideological positions on issues—Democrats, liberal; Republicans, conservative. Voters recognize the differences, and bring their own partisan and ideological preferences more into line, at least to some degree. Elected officials then have stronger electoral inducements to maintain ideological consistency. In fact, such that growing partisan-ideological consistency of this kind has been observed at both the mass and elite levels.

The initial question for the literature was therefore, in effect, which came first: the chicken or the egg—that is, polarization of elites, especially elected officials, or polarization of ordinary citizens? At least superficially, this question was easily answered. As various authors have shown, Democrats and Republicans in Congress began to become more distinct ideologically by the early 1980s, whereas Democratic and Republican voters did not show evidence of increased

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ideological differences until about a decade later, and even then remained much more moderate than elected officials. In his book under review, a kind of sequel (more convincing than the original) to his earlier book on the culture wars, 3 Morris Fiorina displays graphs to compare changes in the distributions of ideological positions in Congress on the one hand, and among citizens on the other—from the 1970s to the 2000s. The congressional graphs show two groups (Democrats and Republicans) pulling apart, eventually leaving a no-man’s land in the very center; the graphs on ordinary citizens show much subtler changes, with the center remaining the largest part of the distribution.

In terms of the chicken-or-egg conundrum, it is as if photographic evidence from some earlier period showed a lot of chickens and no eggs. As far as the literature has been concerned, elected officials “drove” polarization. In Fiorina’s view, the politicians are indeed “disconnected” from the voters, staking out extreme positions that the voters, for their part, reject.

Yet the situation is not so simple. If you had the chicken photos, you would still want to know where the chickens came from. We need a satisfying account of how and why elected politicians became more ideological—what exogenous factor (that is, outside the system of mass-elite reciprocal influence) drove the changes. Did politicians somehow become more ideologically extreme on their own? Moreover, there are potential pitfalls in focusing on the simple question of which level of polarization came first. 4

For one, politicians may just have anticipated the response of voters. That is, they may have acted first—voting in more ideologically polarized ways—but may have done so because of well-grounded expectations of a favorable mass response. In roughly this way, the Republicans’ so-called “Southern Strategy” in the 1968 presidential election—at least a precursor of polarization—was based on the recognition that Southern Democratic voters had ideological and partisan attitudes that were inconsistent and unstable and therefore could readily be challenged to the Republicans’ advantage. For another reason, politicians may have responded to actual ideological polarization among smaller numbers of citizens—for example, activists or the party base—that does not show up in surveys of ordinary voters. In any of these cases, the fundamental source of the change would be in the dispositions of certain groups of citizens (including activists) as opposed to the elected officials themselves.

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3 Fiorina, Culture Wars. In that book, Fiorina relied heavily on aggregating opinion to the state level, and then comparing states, to discount the severity of ideological conflict. In Disconnect, he focuses, more appropriately, on national distributions of individual attitudes.

The books under review provide a variety of approaches to the origins and development of polarization that either identify factors outside the mass-elite reciprocal relation or otherwise go beyond the overly simple chicken-or-egg formulation. In his carefully argued, elegant book, Alan Abramowitz challenges Fiorina’s notion of a disconnect between masses and elites. He acknowledges that members of Congress kicked off the polarization, becoming significantly more consistent in their partisan ideology several years in advance of any parallel change among the citizenry. But he defends an otherwise robust and democratic reciprocal relationship between elite and mass polarization by focusing on a limited segment of the mass public. Using National Election Survey (NES) data from 1984-2004, Abramowitz shows that the electorate, taken as a whole, has shown only marginally increased partisan-ideological consistency (that is, consistent liberal attitudes along with Democratic identification or conservative attitudes along with Republican identification).

Yet those who are “engaged” with politics, for Abramowitz, as evidenced by their self-reported participation in the current campaign—“a substantial proportion of the public and an even larger proportion of the actual electorate” (p.38)—have in fact become substantially more polarized. That is, their attitudes are more consistent across issues, and their issue positions are more consistent with their partisan identification. Abramowitz emphasizes that these citizens are the ones who best fit democratic norms of citizen participation. He also shows that both House districts and even the states have become more homogeneous and less competitive in partisan terms.

Abramowitz argues that the increased level of polarization among the more engaged citizens and the increased state and district partisan homogeneity are enough to give elected officials, such as members of Congress, significantly stronger incentives to cleave to their respective partisan ideologies and thus accounts for a significant part of the continuing elite polarization of the late 1990s and 2000s. Instead of a “disconnect” between citizens and elites, the presumed reciprocal relationship between the two levels is alive and well. Elites started it; but some citizens relatively soon joined in and by now are propelling further change.

To some degree, even Fiorina concedes the point: he presents data showing that, in addition to office-holders, a substantial number of citizen activists—the people who attend meetings, contribute money, and staff phone banks in campaigns—has become significantly more polarized, with presumed consequences for the incentives of politicians. In a sense, the real difference between Abramowitz and Fiorina is about the breadth of the connection between politicians and ordinary citizens with respect to levels of partisan-ideological consistency—whether it involves Fiorina’s activists, perhaps around 1 percent of citizens, or Abramowitz’s engaged citizens, more like 30-50 percent of the
electorate, depending on the election and the standard of engagement. It is in neither case a mere “disconnect” between elites and ordinary citizens.

It remains important to recognize that Abramowitz does not (and could not be expected to) demonstrate empirically the effect of polarization among engaged citizens on polarization in Congress. The relevant period is too short to sustain an appropriate time-series analysis for such a complex relationship. In my view, however, the suggested effects are in all likelihood very important.

Three of the books develop new and significant explanations of polarization among elites. In a provocative chapter on institutions, Fiorina argues for the origins of polarization, independent of any change in the electorate, in a variety of political reforms adopted mostly in the late 1960s and 1970s. The central objective of the reforms, promoted mainly by citizen activists and liberal politicians, was to enhance participation by ordinary citizens. The most important reform from this standpoint (though largely an unintended effect of narrower changes in party rules) was the proliferation of primary elections—and the subordination of regular political party organizations—as means of selecting candidates for office.

Other reforms included open-meeting laws, restrictions on campaign contributions, and support for citizen participation in administrative proceedings. In Fiorina’s view, such reforms swept aside people who participated in politics primarily to obtain or distribute material rewards, or merely to enjoy the perquisites of office. In the end, the reforms helped recruit to public office and political activism cadres of people who were motivated in large part by political beliefs, especially liberal or conservative ideology. In elective office, such people tended toward extreme positions. Elite polarization has mostly reflected the willingness of this new political elite to resist the preferences of centrist voters and act on their own ideological impulses. Fiorina’s argument about the effects of political reform is in principle a possible explanation of how elite polarization got started well before any comparable polarization in the electorate. One qualification is that ideological activists had begun to become more prominent in party and electoral politics even before the onset of the political reforms. More important, Fiorina does not provide evidence of a reduction in the strength of electoral motivation among members of Congress—which is, after all, what the argument implies. In my view, a widespread decline in electoral motivation of Congress members and corresponding increase in concern for policy goals, sufficient to produce sharp polarization in roll-call voting, would also have had other noticeable—often salutary—manifestations in congressional policymaking. Although Fiorina’s proposal should not be entirely dismissed, I am not aware of

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any research or commentary on Congress that points to such a waning of electoral motivation.

In the work that I find most illuminating about elite polarization, Seth Masket proposes an entirely different account, one that posits no transformation in politicians’ motivation and that incorporates an important role for certain groups of ordinary citizens. Although parts of the study deal with Congress, Masket focuses primarily on the extraordinary polarization of the California legislature in recent decades. Largely through case studies based on extensive field research, he demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt that much of the ideologically extreme behavior reflects the influence of what he calls “informal party organizations” at the local level in both parties. That is, in this, operating outside the official party organizations, informally organized networks of activists, membership organizations (labor unions, religious groups), financial contributors, and other participants dominate primary election campaigns and provide crucial support in general elections.

These organizations are generally hierarchical—headed by a boss, who is often an elected politician. For example, Masket describes how Rep. Maxine Waters’ Democratic organization controls party nominations and general election campaigns for state and local offices in South Los Angeles. Crucially, the informal party organizations insist on a high degree of ideological purity. For example, Masket reports the case of a Republican state legislator whom the local organization in effect fired—defeating him for re-nomination at the next election—because, in response to a lengthy and destructive state budget impasse, he had supported a bipartisan compromise that included a modest increase in tax revenues.

The consistent ideological demands of the informal party organizations are significant for understanding their internal dynamics. On the surface, they appear to be dominated by the bosses, who appear to make crucial decisions about which potential candidates to support, and indeed, Masket generally emphasizes the boss’s power. But in principle, a political boss could have any ideological position, from centrist to their party’s ideological extreme. Not everyone who gets elected as a Democrat and has the leadership skills to head an informal party organization is a left-wing ideologue.

The consistent, hard-line ideological tendency of the informal party organizations evidently reflects the dispositions of the available troops, that is, of the mass-based constituencies that campaign and vote for the organization’s favored candidates. It is apparently a situation of “no centrist bosses need apply.” Nor, presumably, could a boss orchestrate a conversion of her organization from ideologically extreme to moderate. From the standpoint of the chicken-or-egg question about masses and elites in polarization, the role of informal party
organizations is mainly a matter of increased participation and efficacy on the part of ideologically oriented mass constituencies.

A study like Masket’s is labor-intensive. We do not know to what extent similar informal party organizations, or more loosely organized approximations, have shaped party nominations in states and districts around the country. Certainly, we have seen an increase in organized, ideologically oriented participation in nomination contests, especially from the Christian Right and very recently the Tea Party on the Republican side. A reasonable inference is that local activists, primary electorates, and party-base constituencies—sometimes coordinated by a dominant local organization—have played a central role in polarization.

Finally, in the work that most directly challenges received wisdom, Theriault offers an integrated analysis of the development of polarization in Congress from the mid-19th Century to the present. For more recent developments, he demonstrates the influence of increasingly ideological political activists and estimates the effect of the increasing partisan homogeneity of states and districts. His distinctive claim, however, is that congressional institutions themselves have played a major role. In what Theriault calls “a two-step process,” the initial polarization of congressional parties, resulting from electoral change, induced members to delegate increased authority over procedural matters to party leaders.

Party leaders in turn used that authority to produce even more pronounced polarization. In a word, they eliminated many of the votes on which the parties were not polarized. The majority leadership used restrictive rules and other procedures to prevent votes on amendments—where votes had often cut across party lines—and substituted votes on procedures—where party cohesion was essentially perfect. For example, instead of permitting a floor vote on an amendment sponsored by the minority party that might gain significant majority party support, the House leadership forces the minority to promote its amendment through a motion to recommit—which is then defeated on a party-line vote.

That this sequence occurred is arguably not very surprising, but Theriault produces an unexpected empirical result that enlarges its significance: He finds that the entirety of the increase in polarization of congressional roll-call voting, as measured by Poole-Rosenthal ideology scores, is accounted for by the increase in the prevalence of procedural votes. Take away the procedural votes that have always been strictly polarized, in other words, and no polarization has occurred. If his complex statistical analysis holds up, it helps explain the increase in elite polarization while largely deflating its substantive significance. We will come back to this point below.
Consequences and Prospects

None of the works under review devote major efforts to addressing the consequences of polarization for policymaking, the prospects for the future of the phenomenon, or the most promising strategies for dealing with it. To the extent they touch on these matters, however, they suggest an alarming and yet confusing situation. The effects of polarization have been deeply problematic. There is no sign of its going away, nor any clear means for policymaking institutions to mitigate its effects. And yet party government, with sharply divided parties, evidently works reasonably well in parliamentary systems.

One observation is discrepant, namely, Theriault’s finding that the entire increase in polarization of congressional roll call voting is accounted for by the increased number of procedural votes. He notes that this finding raises the question whether polarization is “real.” The alternative, however—that it is merely an artifact of floor management—strains credulity. After all, most of the political commentary on partisan conflict in Congress has nothing to do with quantitative analysis of roll-call votes. As one example of the relevant observations, the Republican root-and-branch opposition to Obama’s healthcare plan has extended from floor votes to rhetoric and strategy at every stage of the legislative process, and beyond. To be sure, Theriault’s finding on the effect of procedural votes poses a puzzle. There is a need for more work to clarify the effects of changes in floor management on the Poole-Rosenthal ideology measures.

All of the authors, including Theriault, comment on adverse effects of polarization—various forms of gridlock, destructive conflict, and inability to cooperate. Fiorina suggests that “unbiased information and policy effectiveness are casualties” of contemporary polarized policymaking (p. 157). Theriault begins his book with a well-known anecdote in which partisan manipulation of procedures almost leads to blows in a House committee meeting, and the fallout killed an important bill. Masket begins his book with the anecdote about a California legislator in effect banished for accepting a compromise.

These books do not explore the effect of polarization on the relative importance of various forces that shape policymaking. I have argued that the result on many issues has been a form of “polarized populism,” with nonpartisan experts and elites having reduced influence in relation to that of ideologically oriented mass constituencies. Those who see polarized policymaking as driven by elites should consider the willingness of congressional Republicans in 2011 to block the raising of the debt ceiling, an outcome that elites of all stripes consider disastrous. Yet they also recognize certain advantages—in particular, that clear-

cut party differences enable voters to understand their choices and make consequential decisions at election times.

Abramowitz is the least alarmed about polarized parties, observing, in addition to the positive implications for electoral choice, that they reflect the kind of engaged citizens that democratic theory has always commended. As contemporary research has demonstrated, however, the most engaged citizens—those who are attentive, informed, and prone to participate—are also the most biased and stereotyped in their political responses. Faced with the bad news about such citizens, some of those democratic theorists might revise their aspirations.

Although they do not devote significant effort to predicting future development, none of the authors suggest that the trend toward polarization will soon be reversed or even that it is approaching some limit. A reasonable expectation is that, in the absence of an extraordinary conflict that splits the existing party coalitions, the polarizing trend will continue until most voters who pay any attention to politics have consistent partisan-ideological preferences. We do not know at what level a limit of voter polarization might be reached. However, considering that elite polarization reached current levels only in the last several years, voter polarization can probably go a good deal further. Other things being equal, we should expect that conflict between the parties in Washington will become even more intense, and constructive cooperation between them even more rare, in the next decade or two. The Framers’ miscalculation about political parties has a bleak implication: that the long-run equilibrium condition of the political system is for government to be overwhelmed by partisan conflict, massively incompetent and irresponsible.

Nor do any of the authors go out of their way to identify constructive responses to the situation. Theriault, for example, cautions against hasty reform efforts, noting the potential for unintended consequences. Perhaps it is indeed a bit early to start restructuring institutions, but it is not too early to begin considering the alternatives. There are two basic approaches: 1) adjust policymaking institutions to facilitate reasonably effective party government or 2) adjust electoral institutions to produce less polarized parties. With respect to policymaking institutions, the Senate may well find a way to moderate or abolish the filibuster. However potentially divisive, institutional means of doing so (including the so-called “nuclear option”) are available. But short of constitutional amendment, there is no solution for divided government. Unless a single party becomes dominant, the differences in election timing between the House, Senate, and Presidency probably ensure that divided party control will be a recurring condition. The most plausible institutional adjustment is probably for the president to bypass Congress in ever more brazen disregard of constitutional limitations on presidential power.
My preference is to think seriously about adjusting electoral institutions. One great virtue of this approach is that the states can do the restructuring individually, performing their celebrated role as laboratories of democracy, and that they may choose to do so as part of reforming their own institutions. There is no need to bet the country, nor sell the country, on a single strategy. The first such experiment—an extremely important one—is already underway, as California in a 2010 referendum adopted a form of nonpartisan blanket primary that essentially abolishes the privileged role of political parties and even party voters in choosing candidates for office. Promoted by Governor Schwarzenegger, the measure was intended to terminate the extreme partisan polarization that (along with other features of its political institutions) has rendered California government unworkable.

As Masket points out, California already has had far less polarized politics at present than under an earlier primary system that permitted “cross-filing” on the part of voters. But the new system goes even further. In the blanket primary, all voters, regardless of party, choose from the same list of candidates for a given office in a primary election. Candidates’ party affiliations are listed on the ballot. But instead of the election selecting one Democrat and one Republican, the top two vote-getters, again regardless of party, become the candidates in the general election. The general election could pit two Democrats or two Republicans against each other. The consequences for the kinds of individuals elected should be profound. In some cases, the winning candidate will be one whose strategy, from the outset, is to gain support from voters of both parties. A candidate who locks up the support of the activists and the ideological wing of her own party may lose to one who relies on the centrists, even if fewer in number, along with crossover voters from the other party. Certainly, however, anyone who is worried about how the American constitutional system can function in a condition of death-struggle between the parties should watch the California experiment with deep interest.

No doubt there are a variety of other possible electoral reforms, if adopted, that would promote moderate two-party government in the US setting. What is far less clear is whether the existing crop of elected officials at the federal and state levels, themselves highly polarized, would see any value in that objective. Certainly, however, anyone who is worried about how the American constitutional system can function in a condition of death-struggle between the parties should watch the California experiment with deep interest.

Books Discussed:

