"Polarization and Party Politics: The Decline of Representation in an Advanced Democratic Society"

Professor William Crotty
Thomas P. O’Neill Chair in Public Life
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts

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I. Introduction

Polarization is a broad phenomenon, one that has impacted the politics and policymaking of the United States. This paper brings together some of the more significant research analyses on the roots, evolution and impact of polarization in one of the world’s most advanced democratic societies. The argument is that it is based on an increasingly wide divergence in class wealth; a fundamental division, and one increasingly being magnified, that distorts the nature of democratic representation in a polity, transiting to a new and discriminatory social order based on a “haves” (a small, concentrated economic elite, amounting to 1 percent to 10 percent of the population) – “have-not” split that reframes the essence of the democratic experience.

The presentations focuses are: a. the force and consequences of inequality and its relationship to political representation; and b. the role of political parties as codifiers and maximizers of a polarized politics and its policy agenda.

II. Inequality and Polarization

The roots of polarization can be found in an imbalance in wealth that has grown enormously in recent times, to the point that it has come to dominate politics and dictate programmatic agendas. Wealth translates into political power which assures in turn that political decision-making will reflect, and more to the point, continue to advance the interests of the most affluent at the direct expense of the less well-off. In the process the nature of the society has
changed and with it democratic representative processes have been transformed. Many social scientists have analyzed economic changes in play their consequences.

A study by Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Pool, and Howard Rosenthal critique the more towards greater polarization in relation to social and democratic transformations in the society and, most fundamentally, in terms of the income inequality that has grown to historic proportions over the last three decades. The Republican Party since 1977 in particular has moved away from any support for redistributive policies that serve to reduce social inequalities. They have maintained a consistent and successful campaign to discredit such programs in the name of small government, privatization, neoliberal free-marketism and, if you will, the sanctity of wealth. The emphasis is on opportunity reduced for the mass with the decline in funding for education, health, housing, and other staples of everyday life, and the right to enjoy what one has achieved. The theme strikes chords of individualism and suspicion of government basic to the American experience. In the contemporary context, it is allied with an opposition to collective action that has brought into question the future of the social welfare state and its safety net.

A dominant factor in the successful pursuit of their economic self-interest has been the prominent role of wealth in elective politics. The system as it operates at present is dependent on a massive infusion of private money, virtually unregulated since the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United* (2010).

Those with economic resources are overrepresented in all forms of political participation, including the most fundamental, voting. A number of analysts, Walter Dean Burnham among them, have argued that a greater equality in voter turnout among lower income groups would help to balance to a degree the role of money in politics. It is not an easy objective to achieve. McCarty and associates add that immigration has increased the imbalance: the newly-arrived in
the country participate in elections at lower levels, expanding the economic imbalance in voting and the promotion of group-related issue programs in campaigns.

The study demonstrates “the conservative effect of polarization on social policy” (2006, 186); the fundamental structural foundations of a polarized politics in the society and the impact of inequality on a polarization of policy outcomes which in truth serve to increase polarization and inequality. It is an association others have found also and one that moves in a seemingly never-ending cycle.

In an influential study that received much attention Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson (2010) traced the disparities in wealth over recent decades and its consequences. They state their conclusions in no uncertain terms:

From 1979 until the eve of the Great Recession, the top one percent received 36 percent of all gains in household income—even after taking into account the value of employer-sponsored health insurance, all federal taxes, and all government benefits…. Economic growth was even more skewed between 2001 and 2006, during which the share of income gains going to the top one percent was over 53 percent. That’s right: More than 50 cents of every dollar in additional income pocketed over this half decade accrued to the richest 1 in 100 households. (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, 3)

And even more starkly, if needed:

These mind-boggling differences have no precedent in the forty years of shared prosperity that market the U.S. economy before the late 1970s. Nor do they have any real parallel elsewhere in the advanced industrial world. A generation ago, the United States was a recognizable, if somewhat more
unequal, member of the cluster of affluent democracies known as mixed economies, where fast growth was widely shared. No more. Since around 1980, we have drifted away from that mixed-economy cluster, and traveled a considerable distance toward another: the capitalist oligarchies, like Brazil, Mexico, and Russia… (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, 3-4)

Larry M. Bartels develops a related analysis in *Unequal Democracy* (2008). He assesses class politics, partisan change, the lack of political or economic accountability, the value structure underlying a society polarized along economic lines in what he refers to as “the New Gilded Age.”

Bartels emphasizes the limited role of voters over issue decisions: “… my analysis suggests that the specific policy views of citizens, whether rich or poor, have less impact in the policy-making process than the ideological convictions of elected officials.” (2008, 289) Ideology then trumps all else and most, ideologically-driven, those in office, decide policy outcomes, privately in terms of their personal value structure.

Martin Gilens (2012, 2011) in an intensive study of “economic inequality and political power in America” shows that the “preferences of the well-off groups are much more likely to be reflected in policy outcomes than those of less-affluent citizens.” (2012, 241) Further if the voices of the very wealth conflict with those of lesser income levels, there is no doubt as to which will prevail and the responsiveness of those in public office to the affluent and their concerns has steadily increased.

In this context, political parties are the maximizers. The nature of the association is not difficult to trace:
… Americans at the 90th income percentile donate much more money to political campaigns than middle-income Americans do. [how income groups are not considered part of the equation]…. The citizens who make the most substantial contributions to the politicians and political organizations are typically far more affluent still….wealthy supporters contribute to both Democratic and Republican causes, but donations from this elite economic stratification tend to tilt strongly Republican.”

In short, “redressing the imbalance in political influences will be difficult if the trend toward increased economic inequality continues unabated.” (2012, 241, 251).

Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz (2012) indicts the entire Neoliberal free-marketism that has dominated American politics since the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Economic models that provided the impetus for contemporary economic policies ignore “what is happening to the well-being of most citizens.” They are flawed in that they gave little attention to inequality, its causes and consequences. “Over the last quarter century macro-economic and monetary policies and institutions have failed to produce stability; they have failed to produce sustainable growth; and most importantly, they failed to produce growth that benefited most citizens in our country.” (Stiglitz, 2012, 264)

The data Stiglitz calls on to make his point that inequality has moved to pre-Great Depressing levels is impressive: for the post-1970 decades the GDP grew, yet most Americans experienced a decline in their standard of living; over 65 percent of the nation’s wealth went to the top one percent; and post-2008 and the Great Recession, 93 percent of the wealth created went to the top one percent.
It is difficult to digest such figures. The projection for the next half-century if conditions continue as they have is a society of extreme wealth and privilege for the very few and one of misery and living conditions of unimaginable cruelty for the have-nots in a society permanently fractured by access to wealth.

Stiglitz sees a country where economics dictates to political outcomes and where, in his words, “America is no longer the land of opportunity.” (2012, 265) His argument references others that find much the same conditions in the growth of economic inequality, its association with and dominance of politics and consequences for the nature of representation in an advanced democracy in transition.

III. Political Parties and Polarization

A realignment has been taking place in the party system. It is not one of the more familiar reframing of social group support associations and their related issue concerns from one party to the other, creating a new era of political combat. Rather what may be just as important in terms of governing, the two parties have been solidifying their ideological/policy/partisan group bonds. That is, there has been movement within the electorate from broader and looser, in fact often overlapping, voter coalitions, towards (what in the United States) can be called the partisan/ideological extremes. The Democrats are more liberal, the Republicans more conservative (considerably more). The middle in turn, once considered the basis for electoral success (and to an extent, with ever shrunken moderate centrist presence, still is) and the key to both party victory and policy decision-making, has shrunk. It has declined considerably as
internal party consistency, and with it, the gap or difference in contrasting groups/issues cores of the competing parties, has increased.

Matthew Levendusky (2009) calls this the “partisan sort.” He compares the party system of a generation or so ago with that of the present era:

In the 1950s and 1960s, Democratic and Republican elites were relatively heterogeneous, with a liberal ‘Rockefeller Republican’ wing and a cadre of conservative southern Democrats. But by the 1990s and 2000s, elites were more sharply polarized, with most Democrats on the left and most Republicans on the right. This elite-level shift helps voters understand the set of policy positions that accompany being a Democrat or a Republican. Voters then utilize these increasingly clear cues to align their partisan and ideological beliefs. This tighter party-ideology link in turn fuels the rise in party voting and has broad implications for how candidates run for office and relate to voters more generally … elite polarization, by clarifying what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican, changes the organization of voters’ preferences, which in turn changes their behavior (2009, 2).

The impact of these shifting ideological loyalties has resulted in a quite different party system, to an extent not only a reformulation of the partisan/ideological debate, but a repudiation of the looser, more consensus-driven and less rigid party coalitions found throughout the balance of American history.

Most party scholars accept this interpretation of recent events. There is less agreement however on the extent to which the mass public (as against the party elites) are
polarized. All agree that there is a distinctly different group profile with clearly contrasting agendas that define the two parties. Most who have written on the subject believe also agree that the defining force in establishing the political and policy polarization in both the party and broader electoral system takes place at the activist level. The disagreement centers on the extent to which the mass public is aligned with their party’s elected leadership and the consistency and intensity of the views held and antipathy felt for the opposing party’s supporters.

The Mass Electorate:

There is a debate then as to the intensity and importance of polarization to the voting public. There are no conflicts over whether the parties represent competing social groups and constituencies and that they have distinctly contrasting policy agendas.

Among the most prominent advocates for the competing viewpoints are Morris F. Fiorina and Alan I. Abramowitz. Both argue from much the same data base and examine related electoral periods. Fiorina recognized the severe economic conditions and gaps in income that separate the classes and that the balance of the country’s wealth goes to a small proportion of the population. He is less certain as to the relevance of this distribution to the average voter. The question to be asked in this regard is if inequality is an acceptable by-product of the American Dream. He finds broad public support for government-sponsored social remedies to alleviate existing problems and a willingness to pay higher taxes to achieve such ends. As he describes it, the United States is a country of “Conservative Egalitarians,” i.e., philosophically conservative voters who are pragmatic in their support for government programs.
This gets to the point of his argument in “Culture War?” (2006). The subtitle delivers the message “The Myth of a Polarized America”. Most voters can be found near the center of the political spectrum and are not fiercely divided over national issues. They are tolerant and centrist and not focused on moral/social/religious demands. If so, why then is a culture war seen as the basis for a polarized politics at the electoral level?

Fiorina attributes it to the type of reward sought from political action and the changed nature of the people drawn into politics: “As material incentives declines, fewer political activists were drawn from the ranks of people having a personal material stake in political activity. More and more the field was left to those with policy or ideological motivations. To the former, compromise was a necessary means to achieving their (material) goals; to the latter, compromise directly devalues their (ideological and programmatic) goals.” (2006, 190-191).

The political parties as a consequence emphasize and represent the wrong political divide and the media focuses on conflict and extremes, misrepresenting the nature of the society and its motivating concerns.

Fiorina extends the argument in his “Disconnect” (2009). If what he had argued in “Culture War?” is correct, then why is there such a fiercely polarized politics at the policymaking level? It is Fiorina’s contention that a fundamental divide exists between the electorate, moderate and more centrist as developed in the earlier study, and what he refers to as the “political class.” Those who purport to represent the public interest are in fact divorced from it, misconstruing national priorities. The political class is divisive, extreme, intolerant and aggressively uncivil, a far cry from the style and nature of the voters it claims to speak for.

Fiorina goes on to voice the concern, a serious one given the assumptions of a democratic polity and the value attached to elections as instrument of democratic representation, that those
elected to office and those most influential in determining the substance of policy debate are out of touch with the electorate. He suggests that political actors can engage in “the deliberate attempt… to open or deepen cleavages where they otherwise may not exist or where they appear in milder form. (2009, 169-170).

His broad argument can be summarized as follows: “… polarization has deep roots in a variety of social changes that have increased the homogeneity of each party, widened the differences between the two parties, and encouraged politicians to construct electoral coalitions out of group building blocks that are less encompassing and less representative of the broader public than was the case for most of American history.” (2009, 182-183).

Benjamin I. Page and co-author Laurence B. Jacobs (2009) disagree with Fiorina on the question of class war, diametrically so. On “class war” issue they find the voters more conscious of the problem and concerned with it and at the same time more limited in the government actions they feel are needed to deal with such a national concern than is often believed. Page and Marshall M. Bouton (2006) do agree with Fiorina on the issue of a “disconnect,” if in a more limited area, in relation to foreign policy. In this context, they find voters with more stable and reasonably coherent views that they have been given credit for. It is here that they find the disassociation between what the public wants and believes and the actions and policies of government decision makers.

…most Americans want a foreign policy that places a high priority on economic and social security at home and justice abroad, not just security from attack.

Moreover, most Americans favor cooperative, multilateral foreign policies – peaceful when possible – rather than unilateral military ones … actual U.S.
foreign policy has often diverged markedly from what the public wants. There have been frequent gaps, perhaps even a “disconnect,” between citizens and decision makers … this is troubling for a democracy … U.S. foreign policy would be better and more sustainable if decision makers paid more attention to what ordinary citizens want. (2006, IX).

It is assumed that voters are less knowledgeable and less concerned about foreign policy in comparison to domestic issues that directly impact their livelihood. Page with Bouton shows they do have consistent and more programmatic concerns in this regard than has been acknowledged yet ones that seldom shape the government’s actions in international affairs.

Alan I. Abramowitz puts forward a quite different interpretation than Fiorina. He finds an increasingly polarized and ideologically-driven electorate that places a far greater importance on elections, parties and candidates than in earlier times (as Fiorina also noted). An active, involved and issue-knowledgeable voting base in turn sets boundaries, and by former standards, clear constraints in relation to the issue objective public officials can pursue.

The public, the activists who have the greatest input in defining what a party stands for (again, Fiorina would agree) and the political leaders have all grown more consistent in their views. Abramson more tightly defines polarization in terms of the consistency of views across a range of economic, social welfare, government activity and cultural issues, in addition to approaches to international affairs. With this as an all-encompassing baseline, the political arena has become more clearly and intensely divided, more antagonistic and uncompromising in what it promotes and the actions it takes. As Abramowitz sees it, this is a plus that leads to a stronger representational system.
There is no divide between core party supporter and their leadership on issues. A clarity of and commitment to issue at all levels of party strata translates into more ideologically defined, more clearly and consistently divided parties representative of competing conceptions of what government stands for and what its role in the society should be. This in turn indicates the conditions needed for a responsible party system, long advocated as a corrective to what once were catch-all aggregations of voters with weak ideological and policy commitments and connections to their political leaders.

A consequence of these party and electoral changes is that the center has essentially collapsed. Once the defining characteristic of the American system, the broad, moderate if poorly informed voters found somewhere in the ideological space between the two parties has been significantly reduced in size and importance.

The voting choices made by the voting public and the issue programs endorsed now translate directly into policy outcomes at the elite level. There is a coherence within each of the parties that extends from their base through their institutional structures to their elected representatives. Voters are aware of the increased importance of elections, the clear and diametrically opposed policy platforms that distinguish in the current party system and endorse it enthusiastically. Participation in elections is up as is the interest of voters. It is a quite different message than that found in the Fiorina analysis, one whose broad outlines is more in line with the thinking of most students of political parties.

Tea Party Conservatism:

A driving force in the society, most evident in its impact on policymaking in the Congress, and especially in the House, that has led to stalemate, increased partisan rancor and a
continuing “fiscal cliff” mentality in relation to economic, budgetary and tax measures in particular has been the Tea Party Movement. It has taken a slash-and-burn approach to any redistributive social programs, Democratic party initiatives or Obama administration actions that has come the way of the Congress. Tea Party members present themselves as the ultimate minimalists, with a commitment to an agenda of small government, the deregulation of all forms of private enterprise and a tax structure skewed heavily to the interests of the most wealthy, the present situation. Any effort to raise additional revenues to maintain or expand levels of government services or to move towards a more balanced tax system is rejected out-of-hand. There is no ground for compromise they find willing to accept. This relates directly to why Tea Party candidates were elected; they are representatives of the interests of the voters who sent them to Congress; and they have had an impact on the operation of the Congress and on policy-making nationally well out of proportion to their numbers.

Given their strategic importance in shaping the national debate, in addition to exacerbating the polarization in the society and in its politics, the movement, while representing minority interests, requires attention. There are a number of studies attempting to understand the Tea Party’s quick rise on the political scene and its success in presenting an issue approach with little popular support but of significant impact on national policymaking.

Laurence Rosenthal and Christine Trost in Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party (2012) present a series of analyses intended as reasoned, if critical, assessments of the movement. They attempt to place the Tea Party within the cultural and historical context of populist traditions, identify its roots in the contemporary period and explain its emergence as a political force of consequence. They also look at the strains within the movement, including those created by what was presented as a mass populist uprising and the crucial financial role of
wealthy contributors in ensuring both its survival and its political relevance as well as in determining its programmatic objectives.

On another level, a hands-on introduction and call to action can be found in the activist handbook, *Taxpayers’ Tea Party: How to Become Politically Active -- And Why* (2010) by Sharon Cooper and Chuck Assay. Introduced and endorsed by Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh, the story of the “Taxpayers’ Tea Party” as it is referred to is “the story of American citizens stopping liberalism in its tracks and turning America in a better direction through citizen activism”. (Gingrich, 2010, 1). Put in the authors’ more colorful words, they have written a manual calling for a “taxpayer’s revenge” and setting out “the road to rebellion.” (2010, 9-90, 91-177).

Abramson presents an analysis as to the demographic profile of what was reputed to be a spontaneous uprising of angry grassroots voters enraged by the direction the country was headed in. His findings complement those of others. Older, white, middle class or better, highly religious, their profile is not significantly different from Republicans in general, except for the fact that they move further in the directions indicated and, most significantly, are considerably stronger, Republican loyalists and considerably and more intensely conservative than their fellow party brethren.

Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williams write in their *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (2012), a title that captures the movement’s importance:

Political dispositions matter more than social characteristics in pinpointing exactly who has gotten on board the tea Party train. Although the race, age, and general social status of Tea Partiers certainly have relevance, these broad
background characteristics do not distinguish supporters or activists from millions
of other Americans. Indeed, the social profile of Tea Partiers … fits most
Republicans and most conservatives. Long-standing right-wing views prompted
prospective Tea Partiers to look for a new political home amidst the detritus of the
GOP in late 2008 … their more pessimistic version of conservatism caused them
to be acutely worried about the economic crisis and what [President Barack]
Obama might do to address it. (2012, 26).

Skocpol and Williamson emphasize that Tea Partiers “are very conservative” even when
compared to fellow Republican conservatives; Abramowitz refers to them as “Super-
Republicans.”

Their unifying view is in attacking “Big Government” and its social programs. They
refuse to pay taxes to subsidize those they consider undeserving. This stand in turn can be seen in
maintaining and even extending what they believe should be greater economic support of and tax
relief for the most successful in the population, i.e., the wealthiest, the financial industry and
corporate America; the continued deregulation of business and corporate activities, along with
the promotion of a globalized economic agenda; and a commitment to the privatization of Social
Security and Medicare and an end to the national health insurance plan crafted by the Obama
administration. In short, it is an ideologically-driven movement that promotes its own economic
agenda and stigmatizes those that it sees as lazy and unaccomplished freeloaders, by their
standards what would be most of the American population.

As for the political relevance and acceptance of such a position among the Republican
party leadership, the Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s unusually frank speech to
wealthy political contributors in Boca Raton, Florida during the 2012 campaign attacked the 47% percent of Americans who were takers, not contributors, as compared to the people of success he was seeking contributions from. As he saw it, roughly half the country depended on government, paid no taxes and expected services as their right.

There is of course irony in all of this, as captured by Anthony DiMaggio:

The forces of corporate capitalism and the Tea Party are intertwined. The ideas promoted by the Tea Party, including rhetorical distrust of government, opposition to healthcare reform, and supposed rebellion against the politics-as-usual status quo in Washington, draw on a romanticism of ‘free market’ capitalism disseminated across American political culture …. It may seem paradoxical to claim that the Tea Party has gathered prominence by rebelling against government while at the same time benefitting from government support …. Tea Partiers may be effective in projecting the impression that they are against ‘big government’ and Wall Street corruption, but a review of the group/s politics demonstrates they are situated within the bipartisan system and reliant on corporate funding to survive. (2011, 10).

The impact of self-interest in economic terms, rationalized in terms of an ideology of “freedom,” Neoliberal corporatism and, most debatably, the “American Dream” of individual self-advancement, is in full evidence. It is funneled through the political system, and more precisely the party system, and takes advantage of the fragmented policymaking that characterizes governing institutions in the United States. It has in the process come to enjoy unusual success.
The Pew Center Report: Finally in relation to the mass electorate, the Pew Research Center (June 4, 2012) published an exhaustive study of political polarization over the years 1987-2012. Its findings are much in line with, and serve to reinforce, those reported in the other studies cited. It outlines a powerful and growing divide in the country’s society and it politics, one with fundamental consequences for political representation. The divide breaks along partisan ideological lines, as others have argued, and is tied to competing issue agendas with little if anything in common. Political parties are the instruments of polarization. Republican ideological conservatives, a growing segment of the party, outnumber moderate Republicans two to one. The liberal base of the Democratic party has also been expanding to where it now equals the proportion of moderate party supporters. And while more voters have given up partisan identifications over the last 25 years, preferring to label themselves Independents, they also have been objects of polarization, leaning to one party or the other. Even when these leaners are included with the core partisans, the partisan ideological gap close to doubles between 1987 and 2012.

Substantial differences among demographic sectors of the electorate, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion and class are still to be found in the contrasting party coalitions but they “are no wider than they have ever been.” Not surprisingly, the largest issue divides between the parties are “over the scope and role of government in the economic realm” and the necessity to protect the safety net to continue support for social welfare programs. The other differences in views that appear also are predictable and consistent with other analyses. In roughly descending order, they include environmental concerns, climate warming and its consequences, pollution, equal opportunity policies and immigration.
In more specific terms, comparing Democrats to Republicans: 75 percent of the Democrats believed the government should take care of people who can’t take care of themselves (little changed over a generation) as against 40 percent of Republicans (down from 62% in 1987); that government should help the more needy, even if it means going deeper into debt, 65 percent of Democrats, indicating little change, as against 20 percent of Republicans (down from 39% in the later years of the Reagan presidency); on environmental protection, 93 percent of Democrats favored strict environmental laws, a consistent position since the question was first asked, to 47 percent of Republicans, down from 86 percent; and on an issue that has historically proved to be a fault line separating the parties, support for efforts to improve the position of minorities, even if it involved preferential treatment, 52 percent of the Democrats agreed with the statement, an increase from 33 percent in 1987, as against 12 percent of Republicans (little different from 1970).

The majority of the public continued to believe in hard work and the American dream of individual opportunity (this included blacks and the working class); maintained their confidence in the nation and its future, beliefs somewhat qualified by more recent experiences; and demonstrated little support for the oft-heard conservative lament about the decline of American exceptionalism.

The findings as to policy and value commitments illustrate the basic, seemingly permanent, divide between the parties. They also show that while the intensity may have increased, often substantially by the 21st century, polarization is a fundamental and continuing fracture between the competing parties that speaks to who they are and what they stand for. Thus, it is a politically relevant and conflicting set of views, reinforced by economic developments, not subject to transitory influences or quick fixes. Further there is no reason to
believe that short of a political transformation of a fundamental magnitude, there is little to any likelihood of significant change in the operations of the system as presently constituted.

**Party Activists:**

The critical role the core partisans play in establishing the substantive policy directions of the parties and providing a focal point for the polarization debate is widely recognized. This engaged segment of the electorate is the most partisan, the most ideologically-driven and, given their active involvement in party affairs and decision-making (through the presidential nominating process, national conventions, party organization-building, campaign volunteer work, candidate recruitment and election financing and fundraising) have come to be considered the most significant and influential of any group within the party system.

Larry M. Bartels has developed a sophisticated analysis of the core activists and their views as compared with the swing voters needed to win elections and the candidates chosen to run on the party label for public office. Examining voter surveys from six presidential elections (1988-2008), he explores the strains between core partisans and swing voters on four sets of attitudinal indices, social welfare conservatism, moral conservatism, racial conservatism and anti-government attitudes. Core activists in the Republican party care more about racial and morality issues and less about social welfare measures than do swing voters. Democrats in contrast feel strongly about social welfare programs ad devote little attention to morality and (anti-) racial concerns.

The assumption of the “utility maximization” conceptual grounding Bartels posits for the analysis would predict to a greater concern for, and therefore effort to accommodate, the views of the swing voters needed to expand the partisan ideological base into a broader winning
coalition. This was a cardinal rule for winning elections in the pre-polarization period. Such however has not been the case in recent decades. The partisan activists determine the party agenda and the candidates for elective office stick closely to party-centered appeals. “Overall, the parties’ bases have become substantially more polarized … From 1988 to 2008, the distance between the average positions of core Democrats and core Republicans increased by 50% on Social Welfare Conservatism, by 43% on Moral Conservatism, and by 30% on Racial Conservatism. Increasing partisan polarization on the racial dimension was mostly due to the increasing conservatism of the Republican base; increasing polarization on the moral dimension was entirely due to the increasing liberalism of the Democratic base (with core republicans actually moderating slightly); and increasing polarization on the social welfare dimension resulted from roughly equal movements by both parties’ core supporters away from the center of gravity of the electorate as a whole.” (2010, 24). The last of the measures, anti-government beliefs, alternated pro and con with the partisan control of the presidency.

The partisan/ideological distance then between the parties is substantial and it has been growing. There is little evidence of a willingness in either party to moderate their positions and compromise their views, at least to the extent necessary to relate more directly to swing voters’ concerns during elections. There is at best what might be described as a moderate concern, though falling short of compromise, between candidates for the presidency and their embrace of core partisan convictions and the views of swing voters. Whatever the degree of moderating appeals during campaigns, what is clear is the dominant role of the core activists in establishing the parties’ agenda and the depth and ever-increasing distancing and impact on major issues attributable to the activists within each of the political parties.
In sum then, polarization is played out within a two-party politics. There it takes life, is molded into a cohesive ideological force and influential policy weapon. In reality it is a one party phenomena. The Democrats have undergone a realignment, losing large portions of its white southern, Catholic and working class base with the decline of the New Deal party system. The Republican party, the beneficiary of the defections from its opponent’s coalition and energized most recently by its Tea Party allies, has aggressively moved to the Right, increasingly intransigent and unwilling to compromise its principles. The consequence is a polarized politics that has grown in intensity and importance over the decades with an end nowhere in sight.

Congressional Voting:

Ideology, politics and policy all come together at one point, the congressional vote. An examination of roll call voting in the Congress should indicate if partisan polarization does impact issue decision-making; if it has increased or decreased one time; and if today’s level of polarized issue voting is any different from that seen in the past.

Data on roll call voting for the period 1979-2011 has been compiled and analyzed by Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, Howard Rosenthal and Christopher Hare. The evidence of a polarized politics built on ideological beliefs should relieve any lingering doubts that might exist of the presence of both in a steeply divided Congress and the increasing importance of a partisan ideological polarization to policymaking in recent years (Figures 1, 2).

- Figures 1,2 go about here –
Republicans in the House and Senate have moved decisively to the Right in their voting, and more emphatically in the House. Democrats regardless of the wing of the party, as well as in relation to the party mean, have moved more moderately towards a more liberal voting position. This is in comparison to where the party positioned itself for most of the post-World War II years and is not far removed from where it was at in earlier times in history. Moderates in both chambers and in both parties have substantially declined in the Congress in both numbers and influence. Consequently polarization in the Congress has increased significantly. It is explained primarily by the sharp turn rightward of the Republican party.

The authors write:

… we find that contemporary polarization is not only real – the ideological distance between the parties has grown dramatically since the 1970s – but also that it is asymmetric – congressional Republicans have moved farther away from the center than Democrats during this period ---- Since the mid-1970s, Republicans have moved further to the right than Democrats have moved to the left. This rightward shift is especially dramatic … Congressional Democrats have moved slightly to the left during this period, but most of this is a product of the disappearance of conservative Southern ‘Blue Dog’ Democrats … the northern Democrats of the 1970s are ideologically indistinguishable from their present-day counterparts … (2013, 3).

The evidence on behalf of a partisan ideological polarization in the Congress is impressive, convincing and, I would say, definitive.
As the future of a more consensus-based partisan politics, McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal in an earlier work based on the data, write:

Whether a shift from Republican dominance would end polarization depends on whether the Democrats sit on their heels or occupy the middle. When the Great depression discredited the Republicans, the Democrats adopted policies they had long advocated that moved away from a market economy to a highly regulated state. A large part of the ensuing decrease in polarization was due to Republican moderating and accommodating in an effort to rebuild their electoral fortunes. Moderation was a slow process. The end of polarization and, as well, economic inequality, should be a process measured not in months or years but in decades. (2006, 202).

They add that in projections as to future directions “one should not rule out [the] long-term success of the coalition of the affluent and the ‘moral.’ After all, the Roosevelt coalition of ethnics in the North and racists in the South held for many years.” (2006, 202).

Author Neal Gabler puts it in these terms:

Politically speaking … the conservatives long ago had opted out of politics, opted out of the hurly burly of negotiation and compromise for a kind of quasi-religious orthodoxy that believe any negotiation, any compromise, was breaking faith. As much as anything, this ideological devotion has been responsible for … gridlock. Tiu could no more broker with a political zealot than
you could with a religious one. It is also precisely what made conservatives so forbidding. Every battle for them was Armageddon. (Gabler, 2013, K10).

Barbara Sinclair in an analysis of party polarization in national policymaking and in the Congress would agree with the McCarty et al. findings:

Changes in the orientation of voters and activists seem to provide the most convincing explanation for the external or electoral roots of polarization in the House and Senate …. When activists sorted themselves out into the two parties based on their ideological proclivities and then polarized further in their policy preferences, they presented voters with much clearer signals about what the two parties stand for and what differentiates them. Voters then responded to those clearer signals by sorting themselves out accordingly. But even if activists were the drivers, ordinary voters were willing passengers. By the mechanisms of whom activists and voters chose as candidates and what those candidates needed to do for election and reelection, polarization among activists and voters translated into polarization in Congress. (2006, 34-35).

There then is considerable (although not universal) agreement that polarization exists and defines the modern political culture; that activists are the motivating force; that the parties have separated more decisively into partisan ideological combat teams; that the impact of a polarized politics is clear in the voting on policy issues in the Congress; that the source of the party polarization is the shift of the Republican party to an increasingly more conservative ideological
position; and, although here is where some reservations exists, the party supporters and the mass electorate more generally are also polarized along partisan ideological lines.

IV. Conclusion: An End to Polarization?

Americans have many alternatives for exercising “political voice.” In fact, the policymaking process in the United States in comparison with European democracies is unusually porous. Unfortunately the advantage in such a system goes to those with resources available to exploit it; that is, in the American case to the wealthiest in the population with large amounts of discretionary funds to invest in politics, campaigns, and politicians. They are of little value to the less affluent who, while also theoretically able to influence political decision making through such avenues as working in campaigns, protest demonstrations, or even less likely, help finance campaigns or personally contact elected officials with their concerns. The utilization of such modes of political involvement is skewed to those of status, education, and income.

The major option for the mass public in attempting to shape the political message is voting. Even at this stage, the less affluent participate at levels well below those economically better-off. Their message then is at best weak and muted and, as indicated, more safely ignored. Further, those most active an influential in framing the issue debates and impacting party and candidate stands “are not representative of the citizens at large.” The general rule of politics is that “those who are disadvantaged by low levels of income and education are less likely to take part politically.” (Schlozman et al, 2011, 1)

In this context, Schlozman, Verba, Brady and Shames (2011, 2012) propose institutional and opportunity structural changes that “might overcome politically the inequities characteristic
of citizen participation in America,” i.e. the under-representation of the interests of the less affluent.

By any real-world standard, this would constitute a major societal undertaking. Attempting to reverse a fundamental dynamic in the system of lower class entry into the political process not only involved an extraordinary degree of difficulty, it would not only as projected lead to a level of change, potentially it could even transform much of what has been covered to this point in assessing the dynamics of the polarization process.

The proposals put forth, some implemented by other democratic nations, cover a wide range of institutional and even cultural changes. They include: the adoption of a proportional representation electoral formula; the strict regulation of campaign financing and/or an effective approach to the public financing of elections; compulsory voting; election day as a national holiday; and so on. Among the more fundamental sets of proposals, and likely to be the most difficult of the difficult are recommendations to strengthen citizen capacity and a return to the redistributive social, tax, and economic programs that once characterized the political experience, the objective to introduce a greater social balance with the society that would be reflected in its politics.

Such reforms a present have little visible public support and are unlikely to be even familiar to the vast majority of Americans. Enacting one or more would be most unlikely under present conditions. Even if several, or even all, of the reforms were to be incorporated into the political system, most predictably in modified and diluted forms, they would have only a marginal impact on the conduct of politics and the weakening the dominance of polarization.

Realistically then change to any fundamental degree has little support. Equally unlikely is the modification, much less reversal, in the economic inequalities and their political importance,
the established processes of representation in policy decision-making, the structural redesign within the parties to limit the over-representation of activists’ interests and influence and, ultimately, the practice and consequences of a polarized political space that has come to define one of the most advanced of democratic states.

Schlozman and her associates are well aware of the difficulties. As for the barriers to implementation, they write:

Beyond the inertial effect of the policy status quo in a system that was crafted more than two centuries ago to place roadblocks in the path of policy change, the political obstacles to procedural reform are formidable – especially when the reform in question is expensive, requires action on the part of each of the states, threatens significant interests with stake in current policies, or involves tradeoffs with other cherished democratic values. Moreover, accomplishing the desired outcome is often difficult. Implementation may be lackadaisical. Determined stockholders may find ways to exploit loopholes that subvert the original purpose. Even when implementation is vigorous and no one seeks to use the details to undermine the achievement of the intended purposes, the results may not be as originally predicted. In short, procedural reforms often disappoint. (Schlozman et al., 2011, 55)

Others share their pessimistic assessment. McCarthy and colleagues in referring to what they characterize as “a very stable political system” state: “partisan polarization and economic inequality have proven to be durable features of our political economy for almost three decades. Thus, it is very doubtful that a simple fine-tuning of institutional arrangements will have much of an effect.” (McCarty et al. 2006, 199-200)
Polarization in the economic and party institutional arrangement that feed into it would appear to be here for the long term. Whatever the problem or the potential advantages of what is now in place, the present may well be the future.
Figure 1
Figure 2
References:


