

Crotty, William. 2015. *Polarized Politics: The Impact of Divisiveness in the US Political System*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

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There have been so many books on political polarization over the past few years that it can become hard to keep up. William Crotty's edited volume *Polarized Politics: The Impact of Divisiveness in the US Political System* stands out among these books, however. With the conspicuous exception of Morris Fiorina, the most prominent scholars of Congress and party politics during the 1970s and 1980s have not always played a major role in describing what has happened. Crotty's book rectifies this problem. *Polarized Politics* features chapters by Walter Dean Burnham, Gerald Pomper, and Arthur Paulson, along with others and with Crotty himself. In many cases, these are the people who were pivotal in establishing a working knowledge of American political norms in the years before polarization became so evident. The tone of many of their contributions should cause us concern—in many instances, they appear more alarmed by changes to our political system than are younger scholars who have not experienced anything else.

Crotty himself is a prime example. In the book's introduction and in its first chapter, he discusses the origins of the contemporary American right and draws a distinction between the contemporary right and more traditional understandings of conservatism. It is not just that today's Republican Party is more ideologically extreme than had been the case in past decades; the core principles of its ideology include a hostility toward compromise. Arthur Paulson follows up on this theme, alleging that the growing ideological divide has created a new sort of party system. And Gerald Pomper, writing with Marc Weiner, alleges that this new system has effectively rewritten the constitution. American governance includes numerous unwritten rules

that erect obstacles to legislating that go far beyond the already limited government established in the Constitution. The routine use of the filibuster and threats of a filibuster, both parties' emphasis on only nominating reliable partisans to the Courts, and the ever present threat of primary challenges to legislators who stray from party orthodoxy have created a new system of checks and balances that cripple government's ability to do anything.

These essays, along with Walter Dean Burnham's consideration of changes in voting across different regions of the country, do not necessarily cover new ground. Yet they are important to read because the rhetoric that accompanies their chapters must be taken seriously. These are all careful empirical scholars, so their warnings about polarization and its consequences are more striking than they would be had they come from someone else. In the first chapter, Crotty describes polarization as "a panned outcome, a dynamic achieved with great effort and seemingly unlimited funding." Pomper and Weiner argue that "the new system sabotages Madison's hope that social diversity, the virtue of officials, and the necessity of compromise would overcome the ills of individual ambition and the clash of institutions." They close their essay with a lengthy quote from W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming." Such flourishes emphasize the concern these authors have for the subject.

Another important characteristic of this book is its effort to connect polarization to our government's inaction on specific policy issues. It is taken as a given in the polarization literature that polarization has harmful consequences for policymaking, and some in the media take time to lament the inability of our government to address economic crises or pressing social problems. Few of the people who have studied the role of ideology in politics have had the ability to tie ideological conflict to the particulars of policy proposals. It is thus valuable to see discussions of how legislation regarding health care reform or gay rights have been influenced by

party conflict. Christine Day's chapter on aging policy is of particular interest here. As she explains matters, there has historically been a bipartisan consensus regarding the provision of generous benefits for retirees. Yet this consensus has been shaken in recent years by three different forces. Budgetary necessities have required that the government explore changes to Social Security and Medicare, yet any problems in funding these programs has never been near enough at hand that legislation was necessary. Programs that benefit the aged also find little support from small government conservatives, and thus there has been a conflict between Republicans' ideological leanings and the reality that the Republican Party has become increasingly reliant on older voters. And the provision of benefits to the aged also contains within it the seeds of generational conflict. Day notes that nations that provide generous benefits to the elderly often also provide generous benefits to families with small children, yet in America we often see a zero sum conflict.

A third noteworthy feature of *Polarized Politics* is its inclusion of several chapters regarding the voting patterns of particular groups. Barbara Burrell contributes a chapter on women, Crotty has a chapter on African-Americans, John Garcia contributes a chapter on Latinos, and Lyman Kellstedt and James Guth add a chapter on religion. The authors of these chapters all note that there are concerns that have to do both with voting behavior and policy here—the sorting of, for instance, Latino voters into the Democratic Party is a characteristic of party polarization, yet it has implications for how the parties will approach policies having to do with immigration and other matters that disproportionately affect racial minorities. Likewise, the growing difference in women's representation among Democratic and Republican officeholders is both cause and consequence of women's voting decisions, and it will in turn shape the policies advocated by the two parties. Burrell shows, as well, the extent to which partisan differences

have emerged not just in measurable policy outcomes or position-taking, but in the sort of gendered language used by party leaders.

Shifts in voting among different groups should not be overstated, however. Latino voters did not become markedly more Democratic during the Obama elections (and, it is worth noting, Donald Trump did not do any worse among Latinos than did Romney or McCain). In the case of evangelicals, it can be difficult to determine whether religious views drive political attitudes, or vice versa. And, as Burrell notes, female Republican legislators have gone to great lengths to make the party appear (and be) more hospitable to women. So for all of the sorting that has occurred, the parties have natural invitations to try to limit polarization along racial or gender lines.

As with any edited volume, the contributions here are somewhat uneven. They are uniformly good in quality, but the connections between the chapters, or between some of the individual chapters and the book's broader theme, are not always clear. There is certainly merit to studying voting behavior or the political behavior of some groups within the American electorate, yet in a book that is about polarization, it seems appropriate for the authors to remind readers what the particular policy issues or political behaviors they discuss have to do with polarization. Or to put matters in other words, the concerns that Crotty raises at the beginning are not reinforced by his authors quite as much as they could be. It is not that they all have to agree with him, but they should say whether their expertise leads them to agree or disagree with his contentions about polarization.

This book also does not necessarily break a lot of new ground in its method of studying polarization. This perhaps was not the intent of the book, but somewhat more direct engagement with recent literature on polarization—work by people such as Matthew Levendusky, Greg

Koger, Frances Lee, or Seth Masket—would connect this set of essays a bit more closely with current debates in the field.

This book was published in 2015, and most of the data presented here end are no more recent than the 2012 election. Like virtually everyone teaching American politics this year, I have had a difficult time sorting out which of the worries that I had at that time are worth exploring right now. Is Trump as consequence of polarization? Or could Trump's election (or the backlash to it) be the beginning of a cure for it? It can feel somewhat quaint to be reading about partisan divisions between Obama and Romney voters at a time when we know what became of those voters in 2016. We certainly should not expect prescience on the part of these authors, but such views do influence one's reading experience.

The most striking way in which I found reading this book in 2017 to be an illuminating experience is that the book is so short on solutions. In contrast to, for instance, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein's *It's Even Worse than it Looks*, there is no set of fixes to electoral rules at the end of this book, no set of broader suggestions as to how we should talk to each other or what we should demand of our politicians, of the media, or of ourselves. Perhaps this is simply not the goal of the book, but there may also be more going on here. The sorts of reforms that people such as Mann and Ornstein present—changing campaign finance laws, rethinking primary election rules, and the like—have been treated with skepticism by many. While we do have some evidence that, for instance, the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* has had some effects on who wins elections or what legislators do in office, there is not a substantial amount of evidence that procedural fixes, especially small ones, will do that much to rein in polarization. And, of course, it is hard to determine what, if anything, is feasible in the contemporary climate.

Two themes developed in this book's early chapters are, however, worth consideration. Arthur Paulson, in particular, makes reference to the relationship between polarization and income inequality. This link—explored in the most detail in Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal's 2006 book *Polarized America*—has always seemed more a matter of correlation than causation. The patterns across time in, for instance, the GINI coefficient and the distance between the median Democratic and Republican member of Congress, are striking, but there are simply too many variables in play to suggest that polarization causes income redistribution or that (in Paulson's framing) plutocrats have encouraged polarization. Yet if we take this correlation to be a call to action, it seems to suggest that a broader, class-based politics is a more appropriate goal than is tinkering with election laws.

Another, perhaps more hopeful theme, however, is the simple assertion that things did not have to wind up like this. Crotty's exploration of the origins of movement conservatism, for instance, emphasizes the power of individual thinkers to shape political movements. In his chapter on health care, Thomas Marshall points out that almost all of the components of the Affordable Care Act are quite popular, and are more popular than was "Obamacare" as a construct. Perhaps more skillful politicians will be able to capitalize on this public support in order to end the battles over health care—in fact, perhaps the growing popularity of the Affordable Care Act over the past few months will point us in that direction. Similarly, Paul Brewer and Sean Fetting's chapter on gay rights notes that same sex marriage has largely disappeared as a source of conflict since the early 2000s. Maybe, to tie these different chapters together, there is still room for individual politicians to make a difference or for shifts in public opinion to overcome partisan stalemate.

Among the many books on polarization, this book stands out both for its comprehensiveness and for the strengths of its individual contributors. Overall, it is a well-crafted collection of essays that will be of use both to students and to scholars.