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Delineating the Problem

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Introduction

What do people mean when they say that politics in the United States are polarized? Polarized in what sense? How pervasively? How much more than in the past? For what reasons? Why should we care? And what, if anything, ought to be done about the situation? In the fall of 2005, the Governance Studies Program of the Brookings Institution in collaboration with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University set out to explore such questions. This book is the first of two resulting from that joint venture.

It should be stressed at the outset that these volumes are not meant to embellish rarified and inconclusive academic debates about the phenomenon called polarization. Rather, we are interested in getting to the bottom of the subject because a great deal of conventional wisdom not only presupposes that the nation's political divisions run deep but that they are wreaking great havoc upon our social fabric.

Let us begin by enumerating some important points on which scholars and political observers generally agree. The U.S. Congress is more polarized ideologically than it was a generation ago. In the House of Representatives ideological overlap between the political parties has all but disappeared, and the rise of "safe" districts with partisan supermajorities has tended to push representatives away from the center. Activists in both parties have long been polar opposites, and there are indications that the gap between them has widened in recent decades. Technological and regulatory changes, including the repeal of the "fairness" doctrine, have revolutionized the mass media. News outlets have become more numerous, diverse and politicized.

With these realities widely recognized, what's left for analysts to argue over? In our judgment, the principal bone of contention is the extent to which polarized views among political leaders and activists are reflected in the population at large. (A subsidiary but by no means trivial issue is whether causality runs in one or both directions.) Even here there is some agreement on meaningful trends. While there is no evidence of significant change in the electorate's overall ideological balance during the past three decades, the voters are being sorted: fewer self-identified Democrats or liberals vote for Republican candidates than they did in the 1970s; fewer Republicans or conservatives vote for Democratic candidates; and rank-and-file partisans are more divided in their political attitudes and policy preferences. Also, religiosity (not to be confused with the denominational hostilities of the past) is becoming a telling determinant of political orientations and voting behavior. All else equal, the more often individuals attend church, the more likely they are to regard themselves as conservatives and vote Republican.

The unsettled questions are how far these trends go, and how much difference they ultimately make. Do substantial segments of the mass electorate, not just political elites, tend to cluster consistently into opposing ideological camps that differentiate the respective agendas and candidates of the political parties? Put simply, in a polarized America most Democratic and Republican voters are, if not increasingly segregated geographically, decidedly at odds over a number of salient policy issues. As we explain later in this chapter, while the severity of the country's "culture wars" is overstated, the preponderance of evidence does suggest that some significant fissures have opened in the nation's body politic, and extend beyond its politicians and partisan zealots.

The fissures are interesting in themselves, but only up to a point. What can make them important is the harm they might do to the quality of political discourse and public policies, or even the stability of American democracy. The actual extent of that harm is even more debatable than the nature and depth of the root causes, but many fear for the worst. We hear that polarization accounts for gridlock over major national priorities—such as better budgetary balance, long-range reform of social insurance programs, a new generation of environmental programs, sensible immigration policy, the capacity to mount and maintain a forceful foreign policy, and more.¹ We are told that the nation’s politics and government are becoming less engaging, less responsive, and less accountable to the citizenry. We are warned that the health of vital public institutions—the Congress, the courts, the executive bureaucracy, the news media—is endangered. We are informed that rampant incivility threatens established norms of pragmatic accommodation, or worse, that civil strife may be just around the corner.² We are led to believe, in short, that the Republic has been rendered “dysfunctional.”³ A central aim of our study is to determine how these claims and imputations stand up under scrutiny. For without that determination, there is no way of knowing whether the country has a serious problem, never mind how to correct it.

¹ Here is how one of our colleagues, Thomas E. Mann of the Brookings Institution, summarized the situation at conference on “The Polarization of American Politics: Myth or Reality?” held at Princeton University on December 3, 2004: “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).”

² James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America’s Culture War* (Free Press, 1994), p. 4.

³ Alice M. Rivlin, “Are We too Polarized to Make Public Decisions?” School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University, October 27, 2005. In fairness, Rivlin is not as pessimistic about the prospects for sensible public decisions as this adjective might suggest.

We cannot make progress toward that end until we disentangle the phenomenon of polarization from other things with which it is often confused. In the first place, as Morris P. Fiorina of Stanford University has observed, polarized politics are one thing, close division or partisan parity quite another. An election may be closely divided without being deeply polarized, as it was in 1960, or deeply polarized without being closely divided, as it was in 1936, or neither, as seems to have been the case in the famous “Era of Good Feeling” between the war of 1812 and Andrew Jackson’s eruption onto the presidential stage. The conventional wisdom is that the electorate has been both deeply *and* closely divided during most of the national elections of the past decade. We shall argue that this proposition is valid to an extent. Its proponents often go on to claim, however, that the interaction between *deep* and *close* division is bound to create inertia. But as George W. Bush’s first term demonstrated, a president elected with a minority of the popular vote and working with only a razor-thin margin in Congress could achieve legislative successes even amid polarized politics—at least as long as the majority party was purposeful and unified.

Here is another important distinction: “Polarization” is not synonymous with “culture war.” Intense political conflict can occur along many different dimensions, of which cultural issues form only one. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took dead aim at “economic royalists” at the height of the New Deal, his politics polarized American society. But an economic crisis, not a cultural one, was at the root of the polarization. In the election of 2004, the salience of cultural questions, although significant, was less than exit polls and media reports suggested. Nonetheless, other considerations—such as the Iraq war and America’s role in the world—still divided much of the electorate. Political

turmoil or tranquility, in other words, is not just a function of the extent of society's "cultural" tensions.

Of course, to say that culture is not the only possible dimension of polarization is not to deny its conspicuousness in recent analyses of American politics. For more than a decade, few objects of social commentary have stirred more hyperbole than the supposed culture clash. The nation's elections no longer are described as contests between two highly competitive political parties, but now as a kind of holy war between red and blue states, pitting the devotees of "moral values" against their doubters.

Immediately after the balloting in 2004, for example, the prevailing journalistic story line was that morality had been a "defining issue," cited by Americans more often than any other reason for their support of President Bush.⁴ This interpretation came naturally. It conformed to years of oversimplifications—from candidates who perceived "a religious war going on this country," as well as pollsters and political operatives who spoke darkly of an evenly divided America that "inflames the passions of politicians and citizens alike" and of "two massive colliding forces," one "Christian, religiously conservative," the other "socially tolerant, pro-choice, secular."⁵

The notion of a great cultural collision has also drawn sustenance from scholarly tracts. James Davison Hunter's *Culture Wars*, published in 1991, found a chasm between "orthodox" and "progressive" factions: each "can only talk past the other."⁶ In a more

⁴ Katharine Q. Seelye, "Moral Values Cited as a Defining Issue of the Election," *New York Times*, November 4, 2004.

⁵ The "religious war" label was coined by Pat Buchanan in 1992. Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson, "A War for America's Soul?" in Rhys Williams, ed., *Culture Wars in American Politics* (Aldine de Gruyter, 1997), p. 39. See also, Stanley B. Greenberg, *The Two Americas: Our Current Political Deadlock and How to Break It* (Thomas Dunn Books, 2004), p. 2, and Republican pollster Bill McInturff, quoted in "One Nation, Fairly Divisible, Under God," *The Economist* (January 20, 2001), p. 22.

⁶ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Basic Books, 1991), p. 131.

recent book, titled *The Values Divide*, John Kenneth White sees “two nations.” In the 2000 election, says White, their respective inhabitants cast ballots primarily on the basis of how disparately they “viewed the country’s moral direction.”⁷

Finally, when assessing polarization, we would sound a cautionary note: Beware of visual gimmickry. The red-versus-blue election maps—an artifact of the Electoral College—are static images using rough aggregates. Underneath, partisan differences may be widening on key issues, and more voters may be choosing to live in neighborhoods and counties dominated by people with whom they agree. How to chart such changes without either oversimplifying or understating them is no easy undertaking.

Some Preliminaries

A plurality of the U.S. electorate continues to profess moderate political persuasions. In 2004, 21 percent of the voters described themselves as liberals, 34 percent said they were conservatives, and fully 45 percent were self-described moderates.⁸ These numbers were practically indistinguishable from the average for the past thirty years (20 percent liberal, 33 percent conservative, 47 percent moderate).⁹ Contrary to an impression left by much of the overheated punditry, the moderate middle swung both ways in the election. Both presidential candidates amassed support from

⁷ John Kenneth White, *The Values Divide: American Politics and Culture in Transition* (Chatham House, 2003), p. 164.

⁸ William A. Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck, *The Politics of Polarization* (Washington, D.C.: Third Way, 2005), pp. 3, 25.

⁹ These numbers are based on exit polls. The National Election Study (NES) suggests that the percent of moderates has remained stable over the past three decades, while the percentage of both liberals and conservatives has risen modestly. Complex methodological debates among the authors in this volume

these voters. Fifty-four percent of them went to Kerry, 45 percent to Bush. In fact, the re-election of President Bush was secured chiefly by his improved performance among swing voters such as married women, Hispanics, Catholics, and less frequent church-attenders—not just aroused Protestant fundamentalists.

Nor did a widely anticipated “values” Armageddon materialize over the issue of same-sex marriage. President Bush endorsed the concept of civil unions in the course of the campaign, and about half of those who thought this solution should be the law of the land wound up voting for him. Initiatives banning same-sex marriages were on the ballot in three battleground states. Yet, John Kerry still managed to carry two of the three. The political scientists Stephen Ansolabehere and Charles Stewart III took the trouble to examine county-level election returns carefully and discovered an irony: Overall, by motivating voters and boosting turnouts, the initiatives ended up aiding Kerry more than Bush.¹⁰

With respect to the most persistent wedge issue—abortion—there have been some unexpected twists as well. In the midst of the continuing partisan schism, a recent analysis shows that Republicans are consistently winning among those voters (more than 60 percent of the electorate) who believe that policy on abortion should be more selective. Republican presidential candidates carried this group in 1996, 2000, and 2004—despite the fact that a clear majority of the group leans pro-choice and prefers that abortion be “mostly legal” rather than “mostly illegal.” The staunchly pro-life

cloud the conclusions we feel confident about drawing from these data. Suffice it to say that there has not been a huge swing away from the center since the 1970s.

¹⁰ Stephen Ansolabehere and Charles Stewart III, “Truth in Numbers,” *Boston Review* (February-March, 2005).

Republican party seems to be persuading millions of moderately pro-choice voters that its positions on specific abortion policies are reasonable.¹¹

In the 2004 election, moral values turned out to be the leading concern of just 22 percent of the electorate—at most.¹² (When the Pew Research Center surveyed the voters with an unprompted open-ended formulation, instead of pigeonholing them with a fixed list of choices, only 14 percent of the respondents volunteered some version of “values” as their first concern.)¹³ For the overwhelming majority of voters a combination of other issues such as the Iraq war, plus the terrorist threat, were more salient. And little noticed, the percentage of moralists appears to have been, if anything, lower in the 2004 election than in 2000 and 1996.¹⁴

What about the TV maps that depict “red” America clashing with “blue”? They are colorful but crude. Plenty of states ought to be painted purple.¹⁵ There are red

¹¹ Jim Kessler and Jessica Dillon, “Who Is Winning the Abortion Grays?,” (Washington, DC: ThirdWay, 2005).

¹² Curiously, in spite of this relatively modest share, many a seasoned political analyst insisted that the “values” cleavage dominated the election. James Carville and Stanley Greenberg, for example, concluded that Bush won the election largely because of the “attack on Kerry on abortion and gay marriage and the extreme cultural polarization of the country.” Yet, their own poll numbers indicated that the “most important issues” were Iraq, terrorism, and national security, which formed a combined total of nearly 40 percent, whereas “moral values” accounted for just under 20 percent. See James Carville and Stanley Greenberg, “Solving the Paradox of 2004: Why American Wanted Change but Voted for Continuity,” November 9, 2004.

¹³ Pew Research Center for the People and Press, *Moral Values: How Important?* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2004), p. 2.

¹⁴ Twenty-two percent of the voters in 2004 cited moral issues, according to the prevailing exit poll estimates. But 35 percent had placed moral/ethical issues at the top in 2000, and fully 40 percent had done so in 1996. “The Triumph of the Religious Right,” *The Economist* (November 13, 2004). Naturally, one has to take all these figures with a large grain of salt. The figures vary with the exact survey instruments used. Nonetheless, the available numbers decidedly do not suggest that “moral values” had surged to new heights by 2004.

¹⁵ Estimates of “purple” states vary considerably according to the methodology employed. Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along? The Reality of a Polarized America,” *The Forum*, vol. 3 no. 2 (2005), provides a tally of only 12, but other estimates suggest a near plurality of states. For example, 17 states fell into the category according to a pre-election analysis that weighed (a) the percentage margin of victory in the 2000 and 1996 election, (b) whether a state voted consistently for one

states—Oklahoma, Kansas, North Carolina, and Virginia, to name a few—that have Democratic governors. The bright blue states of California, New York, and even Massachusetts have Republican governors. Some red states such as Tennessee and Mississippi send at least as many Democrats as Republicans to the House of Representatives. Michigan and Pennsylvania—two of the biggest blue states in the last election—send more Republicans than Democrats. North Dakota is blood red (Bush ran off with 63 percent of the vote there). Yet that state’s entire congressional delegation remains composed of Democrats. On election night, Bush also swept all but a half-dozen counties in Montana. But that didn’t prevent the Democrats from winning control of the governor’s office and state legislature—nor stop, we might note, the decisive adoption of an initiative allowing patients to use and grow their own medicinal marijuana.¹⁶

In sum, just as the actual configuration of public attitudes in the United States is more complex than the caricature of a hyper-politicized society torn between God-fearing evangelists and libertine atheists, the country’s actual political geography is more complicated than the simplistic picture of a nation separated into solidly partisan states or regions.

To these prefatory observations, one more is in order: For all the hype about the ruptures and partisan rancor in contemporary American society, the strife pales in comparison with much of the nation’s past. There have been long stretches of American history in which conflicts were far worse. Epic struggles were waged between advocates of slavery and abolitionists, between agrarian populists and urban manufacturing interests

party in the past four presidential elections or swung back and forth, and (c) whether trends in the past two presidential elections made a state significantly more competitive or less. Richard S. Dunham and others, “Red vs. Blue: The Few Decide for the Many,” *Business Week*, June 14, 2004, p. 63.

at the end of the nineteenth century, and between industrial workers and owners of capital well into the first third of the twentieth century. Yet, what those now nostalgically pining for a more tranquil past remember are the more recent intervals of consensus.

Yes, there have been interludes when it was possible to speak of “the end of ideology,” in Daniel Bell’s famous phrase, but those periods have been more the exception than the norm. Of all these periods, the two decades between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s may have been the most exceptional of all. It could not last, and it did not. The relative harmony between the parties on international affairs in the 1950s collapsed amid the anti-war protests of the 1960s. A complacent entente on race gradually gave way with the Supreme Court’s intervention in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the civil rights movement. By 1964, emerging differences between the parties had triggered a Republican surge for Senator Barry Goldwater’s candidacy in the South, a harbinger of even bigger things to come. President Eisenhower’s “Modern Republicanism” brought a period of relative partisan peace on the central question of how government should manage the economy (recall Nixon’s famous admission, or boast, that “We are all Keynesians now”). The ceasefire ended, however, just a few years later amid rising rates of inflation and of marginal taxation. Supply-side economics made its debut, and the Republicans, once fiscally conservative, now morphed into the party of lower marginal rates secured by permanent (as distinct from strictly counter-cyclical) tax cuts.¹⁷

¹⁶ The Montana Medical Marijuana Act won the approval of 61.8 percent of Montanan voters, faring 3.5 percentage points better than Bush, according to statewide election data.

¹⁷ In a series of papers, Geoffrey Layman and Thomas Carsey have shown that rather than one dimension of conflict diminishing or displacing prior dimensions, these dimensions have been layered on top of one another since the 1960s, a process they call “conflict extension.” See especially Layman and Carsey, “Party Polarization and ‘Conflict Extension’ in the American Electorate,” *American Journal of Political*

Any serious exploration of today's political polarities has to be placed in historical context. We have to ask: Compared to what? Four decades ago, cities were burning across the United States; a sitting president, two presidential candidates, and the leader of the civil rights movement were assassinated; another sitting president was driven from office; and a hail of bullets felled students at Kent State University. George W. Bush is, by current standards, a "polarizing president." But in comparison with, say, Abraham Lincoln or Lyndon B. Johnson, the divisions of the Bush era appear shallower and more muted.

Polarization in Perspective

Badly in need of a reality check, popularized renditions of the polarization narrative were subjected to a more systematic assessment a couple of years ago in a book provocatively titled *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. In this intriguing study, rich with survey data, Stanford's Fiorina and his associates reaffirm the oft-obscured fundamental fact that most Americans have remained centrists, sharing a mixture of liberal and conservative views on a variety of presumably divisive social questions. Ideologues of the left or right—that is, persons with a *weltanschauung*, or whose politics consistently form an overarching world view that tilts to extremes—are conspicuous on the fringes of the two parties and among political elites, but scarcely the public at large. Indeed, there, sentiments appear to be moderating, not polarizing, on

Science 46, 4 (October 2002): 786-802; and "Party Polarization and Party Structuring of Policy Attitudes: A Comparison of Three NES Panel Studies," *Political Behavior* 24, 3 (September 2002): 199-236.

various hot-button issues. To cite a couple of striking examples, the authors found notable increases in social acceptance of interracial dating and of homosexuals.¹⁸

Moreover, the authors argued, the moderate consensus seems quite ubiquitous. The inhabitants of red states and blue states differ little on matters such as gender equity, fair treatment of blacks in employment, capital punishment, and the merits of environmental protection.¹⁹ Majorities in both places appear to oppose outlawing abortion completely or permitting it under all circumstances, and their opinions have changed little over the past thirty years.

Fiorina's findings squared with earlier research by several social scientists. In an important article published in 1996, Princeton sociologist Paul DiMaggio and co-authors John Evans and Bethany Bryson found little empirical basis for supposing that social attitudes had become more polar in the U.S. population.²⁰ On the contrary, gaps among groups over race and gender issues, crime, sexual morality, and the role of the welfare state had either remained quite constant or narrowed over time. Similarly, after studying eight communities in depth, Alan Wolfe of Boston College concluded in his book, *One Nation, After All*, that Americans had grown more, not less, tolerant and united on such issues.²¹

¹⁸ Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (Pearson Longman, 2005), pp. 109-126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁰ Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson, "Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 102, no. 3 (November 1996), pp. 690-755.

²¹ Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (Viking, 1998), p. 320. For additional support of this general proposition, see Wayne Baker, *America's Crisis of Values* (Princeton University Press, 2005) and Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson, "Are the Rumors of War Exaggerated? Religious Orthodoxy and Moral Progressivism in America," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 102 no. 3 (November 1996), pp. 756-787.

That said, the central motif of Fiorina's work is not that signs of polarization are *nowhere* to be found. Again, the argument is that they exist but principally amid the polity's most active antagonists, while the rest of the population mostly looks on. That observation is scarcely novel or controversial. For years, other scholars had been observing the tendency of the political class to grow more partisan.²² DiMaggio and his associates discerned a pattern of "depolarization" among Americans when classified by age, education, sex, race, region, and even religion. The main exception was persons who clearly identified themselves as political partisans. These had drawn apart, and according to more recent data have continued to do so.²³

No knowledgeable observer doubts that the American public is less divided than the political agitators and vocal elective office-seekers that claim to represent it. The interesting question, though, is how substantial are the portions of the electorate that heed their opinion-leaders, and thus might be hardening their political positions. Here, as best we can tell, the tectonic plates of the nation's electoral politics appear to be shifting more than Fiorina and his co-authors were willing to concede, either in their original monograph or the revised and updated second edition.²⁴

²² See, for instance, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "The Polarization of American Politics," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 46, no. 4 (November 1984), pp. 1061-1079; Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "D-NOMINATE After 10 Years: A Comparative Update to Congress," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1 (February 2001), pp. 5-29. See also, David C. King, *Extreme Politics: Polarization in the United States* (forthcoming). See also Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey, "Ideological Realignment in Contemporary American Politics: The Case of Party Activists," paper prepared for the 2000 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.

²³ John Evans, "Have Americans' Attitudes Become More Polarized?—an Update," *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 84 (2003): pp. 71-90. In Evans's words, "polarization...is among political activists who are becoming more polarized over the issues that have been of concern to politically active religious conservatives." For a contrary perspective, see Melissa Collie and John Mason, "The Electoral Connection Between Party and Constituency Reconsidered," in David Brady, John Cogan, and Morris Fiorina, eds., *Continuity and Change in House Elections* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

²⁴ We are scarcely original in this regard. See, for instance, Donald C. Baumer and Howard J. Gold, "Party Images and Partisan Resurgence," paper prepared for the 2005 annual meeting of the American

Even though the mass electorate has long formed three comparably-sized blocs—29 percent identifying themselves as Republicans, 33 percent as Democrats, and almost all the rest as independents—the attributes of the Democratic and Republican identifiers have changed; they are considerably more cohesive ideologically than a few decades ago.²⁵ In the 1970s, it was not unusual for the Democratic party to garner as much as a quarter of the votes of self-described conservatives, while the GOP enjoyed nearly a comparable share of the liberal vote. Since then, those shares have declined precipitously.²⁶ By 2004, Kerry took 85 percent of the liberal vote, while Bush claimed nearly that percentage among conservative voters.

Further, as their outlooks tracked party loyalties more closely, Democratic and Republican voters became far less prone to desert their party's candidates. As Princeton University political scientist Larry Bartels has demonstrated, party affiliation is a much stronger predictor of voting behavior in recent presidential elections than it was in earlier

Political Science Association, and Richard Fleisher and Jon R. Bond, "Evidence of Increasing Polarization Among Ordinary Citizens," in Jeffrey E. Cohen, Richard Fleisher, and Paul Kantor, eds., *American Political Parties: Decline or Resurgence* (CQ Press, 2001).

²⁵ These shares have varied over time, but those in 2004 were almost identical to those in 1987. The Pew Research Center for the People and Press, *Democrats Gain Edge in Party Identification* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2004), p. 2. Some analysts stress that within the three-part division, the fastest growing group has been persons registering as independents or "other." Even if everyone in this category were a genuine centrist—a big "if"—the main thing to remember is that most registered voters continue to identify as either Democrats or Republicans, and, as we shall show, their views are diverging in a number of important respects. Moreover, in an important recent analysis, Luke Keele and James Stimson show that the share of "pure" independents (voters who do not consider themselves closer to one party than to the other) has fallen by half since the early 1970s, from 14 percent of the electorate to just over 7 percent. More than three quarters of self-declared independents now admit to being closer to one party than the other. Keele and Stimson, "Polarization and Mass Response: The Growth of Independence in American Politics," paper prepared for delivered at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

²⁶ Galston and Kamarck, *The Politics of Polarization*, p. 45. A generation ago, party identification and ideology were weakly correlated. Now the two are much more tightly intertwined. See Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, "Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 60 no. 3 (August 1998), pp. 634-652, also Abramowitz and Saunders, "Rational Hearts and Minds: Social Identity as Party Identification in the American Electorate," paper prepared for the 2004 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

ones.²⁷ In 2004, nearly nine out of every ten Republicans said they approved of George W. Bush. A paltry 12 percent of Democrats concurred. In an earlier day, three to four times as many Democrats had held favorable opinions of Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and Dwight Eisenhower.

Deepening Disagreements

Of course, the use of the terms liberal and conservative can be squishy—and if, at bottom, there’s still not much more than a dime’s worth of difference (as the saying used to go) between the convictions of Democrats and Republicans, the fact that partisans are voting more consistently along party lines says little about how polarized they might be. What counts, in other words, is the *distance* between their respective sets of convictions.

On the issues that mattered in the last presidential election, the distance was considerable. Glance at the main one: national security and foreign policy. The Pew Research Center’s surveys found, for example, that while almost seven in ten Republicans felt that the best way to ensure peace is through military strength, fewer than half of Democrats agreed.²⁸ In October 2003, 85 percent of Republicans thought going to war in Iraq was the right decision, while merely 39 percent of Democrats did.²⁹ When asked whether “wrongdoing” by the United States might have motivated the attacks of

²⁷ Larry M. Bartels, “Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952-1996,” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 44, no. 1 (January 2000), pp. 35-50.

²⁸ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *2004 Political Landscape: Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2004), p. 7.

²⁹ By December 2003, the percentage of Republicans holding this view rose to 90 percent. The percentage of Democrats went up to 56 percent, before dropping back again later on. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Bush Rally, But No Fundamental Change in Concerns About Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2003), p. 6.

September 11th, a *majority* of Democrats, compared to 17 percent among Republicans, said yes.³⁰ Democrats assigned roughly equal priority to the war on terrorism and protecting American jobs or workers (89 percent and 86 percent, respectively); Republicans, in comparison, gave far greater weight to fighting terrorism than to worker protection.³¹ Popular support for the Iraq war has sagged since these surveys were taken. Yet, even in March of 2006, nearly seven out of ten Republicans still perceived the U.S. military effort in Iraq as going well, while three out of ten Democrats agreed. More than two-thirds of Democrats (but only 27 percent of Republicans) felt the United States should bring its troops home as soon as possible.³² Not surprisingly, fully 77 percent of the electorate saw important differences between the parties in 2004, a level never previously recorded in modern survey research.

Among so-called active partisans, representing a non-trivial fifth of all voters, the gap was even more dramatic.³³ Reviewing 2004 National Election Study data, Alan Abramowitz of Emory University and Kyle Saunders of Colorado State University report that 70 percent of the Democrats, but just 11 percent of Republicans, typically favored diplomacy over the use of force.³⁴ On major questions of domestic policy, the difference was only a little less pronounced. The issue of health insurance, for example, ranked high for 66 percent of the Democrats, but only 15 percent of the Republicans.

³⁰ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Foreign Policy Attitudes Now Driven by 9/11 and Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2004), p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³² David Kirkpatrick and Adam Nagourney, "In an Election Year, a Shift in Public Opinion on the War," *New York Times*, March 27, 2006, p. A12. The polling data reported in this article also were based Pew surveys that queried respondents on whether the war was going "very well or fairly well."

³³ Active partisans are defined as voters who engaged in two or more political activities other than voting.

³⁴ Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, "Why Can't We All Just Get Along? The Reality of a Polarized America," *The Forum*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2005).

Then there is the matter of abortion. Following the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, no domestic issue has been more contentious. It, more than anything else, has been the crucible that has mobilized observant religious voters (a force about which we will have more to say later). A majority of Americans accept abortion under various circumstances. But the majority wobbles when abortion is framed as an absolutely unrestricted right to choose. The persistence of this dichotomy is noteworthy. Fiorina and his colleagues, in fact, provide perhaps the most emblematic evidence of the ongoing rift. When people were asked in 2003 whether abortion should be called an act of murder, 46 percent said yes and exactly 46 percent demurred.³⁵ No doubt, if the question had been directed only at persons who identified themselves as Republican or Democratic loyalists, the bimodal percentages would have been at least as high, and the underlying passions even more polar.

Redder Reds, Bluer Blues

In assessing these deepening disagreements we must also consider the territorial contours of today's polarization. The question is of importance because, if voters tend to migrate geographically toward likeminded voters, the resulting political segregation of Democrats and Republicans could increasingly lock in their differences: A person's partisan inclinations seem more likely to deepen and endure if he or she is spatially surrounded by fellow partisans.

³⁵ Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, p. 81.

According to Fiorina and his associates, no wide gulf separates the residents of Republican-leaning (red) states and Democratic-leaning (blue) states. But the fact that states are large aggregates in which the minority party almost always obtains one-third or more of the vote raises the question of what constitutes a significant difference among states. Consider some of the data Fiorina himself presents from the 2000 election. In red states, Republican identifiers slightly outnumbered Democrats; in blue states, Democrats enjoyed a 15-point edge. In red states, the share of the electorate that was conservative was 20 points larger than the share characterized as liberal. Blue state residents were 15 points less likely to attend church regularly, 11 points more supportive of abortion rights, 12 points more likely to favor stricter gun control, and 16 points more likely to strongly favor gays in the military. Polarization exists to some extent in the eye of the beholder. We think, though, that these and other quantitative differences between red and blue states are large enough to make a qualitative difference.

The results of the 2004 election only reinforced this judgment. Using a slightly different definition of red and blue states (namely, states that Bush and Kerry, respectively, carried by at least 5 points), Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders find differences in excess of 20 points along numerous dimensions, from church attendance to gun ownership to attitudes on hot-button social issues such as abortion and gay marriage.³⁶

There are indications, moreover, that red states have gotten redder, and blue states bluer, at least in this sense: Presidential vote tallies in more states in recent years have strayed from the national norm. To be sure, this pattern of differentiation could be

³⁶ Abramowitz and Saunders, “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along,” p. 13.

subject to change. Suppose, as a thought experiment, a presidential election were held as of this writing (in the spring of 2006), and that Bush was an incumbent seeking another term. With his popularity at its present lows and a solid majority of residents in states he had carried in 2004 now disapproving of him, quite a few “red” states might best be colored pink or even a pale blue.³⁷ But at least as of 2004, it was clear that the presidential candidates’ margins of victory in more and more states had widened.

In 1988, there were only 15 states where Bush 41 won with vote shares greater than 5 points above his national average, and only nine states where his shares were more than 5 points below his national average. Put another way, fully 26 states were within a 5-point range of the national percentage as a whole. By contrast, in 2004, Bush 43 carried 20 states with vote shares more than 5 points above his national average, while there were 12 states where he ended up more than 5 points below it, while just 18 states fell within the 5-point range.³⁸

These results are not an artifact of an arbitrary selection of elections. In the election of 1960, a near-tie in the popular vote between Kennedy and Nixon, a remarkable 37 states yielded results within 5 points of the national margin; in 2000, another election with a razor-thin popular vote margin, only 21 states ended up within this range. Nor do these results only reflect the polarizing consequences of George W.

³⁷ See Richard Morin, “Pink Is the New Red,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2006, p. A13.

³⁸ Galston and Kamarck, *The Politics of Polarization*, p. 54 (2004 figures slightly revised). Using a different methodology, Abramowitz and Saunders reach a parallel conclusion. Comparing two presidential elections (1976 and 2004) with nearly identical popular vote margins, they found that the average state margin of victory rose from 8.9% to 14.8%, the number of uncompetitive states (with margins of 10 points or more) rose from 19 to 31, while the number of competitive states (with margins between 0 and 5 points) fell by half, from 24 to 12. Not surprisingly, the number of electoral votes in uncompetitive states soared from 131 to 332. These numbers merely confirm what every contemporary presidential campaign manager instinctively understands: in normal political circumstances, when neither party has suffered a major reversal (a big-time scandal or policy failure, for instance), the actual field of battle has tended to be small and concentrated in the Midwest.

Bush's campaign and governance styles; in 1996 race between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, only 22 states were within 5 points of the national margin, nearly identical to the 2000 result. In fact, the past three presidential elections have produced three of the four most polarized state results in the past half century. (The Reagan-Carter election of 1980 is the fourth.)³⁹

There also has been evidence of increasing dispersion at the sub-state level. One way to get closer to developments on the ground is to examine the share of the population living in places where voters sided with one party or the other by lopsided margins. Compare the three closest elections of the past generation. In 1976, when Jimmy Carter beat incumbent Gerald Ford by a scant 2 points, only 27 percent of voters lived in landslide counties (where one candidate wins by 20 points or more). In 2000, when Al Gore and George W. Bush fought to a virtual draw, 45 percent of voters lived in such counties. By 2004, that figure had risen further, to 48 percent.⁴⁰

Using counties rather than voters as the unit of analysis yields similar results. In 2004, fully 60 percent of the nation's counties handed supermajorities of 60 percent or more to either Bush or Kerry. The corresponding figure for Bush-versus-Gore had been 53 percent in 2000, and for Bill Clinton-versus-Robert Dole, merely 38 percent in 1996.⁴¹ As far as we can tell, the 2004 figure was exceeded only once in the past half-century, when Richard Nixon routed George McGovern in 1972. In the earlier close

³⁹ William A. Galston and Andrew S. Lee; tabulations on file with the authors.

⁴⁰ Bill Bishop, "The Great Divide," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 4, 2004. See also, his "The Cost of Political Uniformity," *Austin American-Statesman*, April 8, 2004; "Political Parties Now Rooted in Different Americas," *Austin American-Statesman*, September 18, 2004; "The Schism in U.S. Politics Begins at Home," *Austin American-Statesman*, April 4, 2004.

⁴¹ Mark Mellman, "Americans Are Voting as a Bloc," *The Hill*, January 19 2005, p. 16.

elections of 1960 and 1976, landslide counties represented 48 and 37 percent, respectively, of the total. The figures from 2000 and 2004 thus strike us as significant.⁴²

To be sure, depicting the political landscape exclusively on the basis of vote tallies for presidential candidates is not wholly satisfying—and, again, 2008 could conceivably alter much of the terrain we have described. As we intimated earlier, more evidence would be needed to demonstrate the significance of the country’s partisan geographic divide. For example, one would need to show that elective offices down the line—Senate and House seats, governorships, state legislatures—are also now falling like dominos into the hands of one party or the other.

While we do not attempt so laborious an analysis here, this much is relatively easy to see: The number of congressional districts that split their votes between presidential and congressional candidates has declined. Typically, this number decreases between a presidential election and the following midterm. But just the opposite happened between 2000 and 2002, yielding the fewest split districts in at least half a century. In 2004, a mere 59 congressional districts went in opposite directions in presidential and House elections. Compare this low figure to 2000, when there were 86 such districts, or 1996 and 1992, when there more than 100.⁴³ Or compare the 2002

⁴² Galston and Lee; tabulations on file with the authors. For the methodological debate sparked by the initial county-level findings, see Philip Klinkner, “Red and Blue Scare: The Continuing Diversity of the American Electoral Landscape,” *The Forum*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2004), and Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing, “Response to Philip A. Klinkner’s ‘Red and Blue Scare: The Continuing Diversity of the American Political Landscape,” *The Forum*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2004). Klinkner acknowledges an increase in landslide counties between 2000 and 2004: Philip Klinkner and Ann Hapanowicz, “Red and Blue Déjà vu: Measuring Political Polarization in the 2004 Election,” *The Forum*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2005).

⁴³ Dan Balz, “Partisan Polarization Intensified in 2004 Election,” *Washington Post*, March 29, 2005.

midterm's figure of 62 with the three previous midterms, which averaged almost precisely twice that number.⁴⁴

These trends have not been confined to the House. In 2004, the percentage of states won by the same party in that year's Senate and presidential races rose to a level not seen for forty years, and the percentage of Senate seats held by the party winning that state in the most recent presidential election rose to the highest level in at least half a century.⁴⁵ As one might infer from these results, by 2004 the percentage of partisans voting for the other party's House or Senate candidates had fallen to levels not seen since the early 1960s.⁴⁶

In sum, although these data hardly paint a complete picture, they do suggest that sizeable blocs in the national electorate of late have not been conducting centrist business as usual. Like the elections of 1960 and 1976, those of 2000 and 2004 were closely contested. Unlike the elections of 1960 and 1976, the past two were slugged out primarily in a small handful of states. Elsewhere, larger shares of voters seem to have gotten sorted into states more strongly predisposed to one side or the other. And the predispositions seem rooted in appreciably different characteristics. We are inclined to concur with Fiorina that such contrasts fall well short of proving that Americans are mostly a bunch of "culture warriors." But we also suspect that where there is smoke there may be, if not exactly a four-alarm fire, some significant friction.

⁴⁴ Gary C. Jacobson, "Terror, Terrain, and Turnout: Explaining the 2002 Midterm Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, 1 (2003): 12.

⁴⁵ Gary C. Jacobson, "Polarized Politics and the 2004 Congressional and Presidential Elections," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 120 no. 2 (June 2005), pp. 208-209.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 210.

Sorting

What has happened in the electorate has much to do with how sharply political elites have separated along their respective philosophical and party lines. That separation is not in doubt. In the 1970s, the ideological orientations of many Democratic and Republican congressmen overlapped. Today, the congruence has nearly vanished. By the end of the 1990s, almost every Republican in the House was more conservative than every Democrat.⁴⁷ And increasingly, their leaders leaned to extremes more than the backbenchers have. Outside Congress, activists in the two political parties have diverged sharply from one another in recent decades. Meanwhile, interest groups, particularly those concerned with cultural issues, have proliferated and now ritually line up with one party or the other to enforce the party creed. Likewise, the news media, increasingly partitioned through politicized talk radio programs, cable news channels, and Internet sites, amplify party differences.

These changes, the reality of which hardly anyone contests, raise an important scholarly question with profound practical implications: What are the effects of elite polarization on the mass electorate? One possibility raised by Fiorina and others is that the people as a whole are not shifting their ideological or policy *preferences* all that much; rather, they are being presented with increasingly polarized *choices*. These force voters to change their political behavior in ways that analysts mistake for shifts in underlying preferences.⁴⁸ A plausible inference is that if both parties nominated

⁴⁷ Gary C. Jacobson, "Party Polarization in National Politics: The Electoral Connection," in Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, eds., *Polarized Politics* (CQ Press, 2000).

⁴⁸ See Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, *Culture War?* pp. 165-186.

relatively moderate, non-polarizing candidates, as they did in 1960 and again in 1976, voters' behavior might revert significantly towards previous patterns. Another possibility is that changes at the elite level have communicated new information about parties, ideology, and policies to many voters, leading to changes of attitudes and preferences that will be hard to reverse, even in less polarized circumstances.

In our view, it is reasonable to believe that both processes can occur. On the one hand, there is no reason to believe that today's voters are unresponsive to changes in choices that the parties offer. The Democratic party's decision to nominate more moderate candidates in 1960, 1976, and 1992 in the wake of more liberal but failed candidacies did shift mass perceptions and behavior. A 2008 presidential contest between, say, Senator John McCain and a Democratic nominee seen as more moderate than Gore and Kerry would almost certainly change the dynamics of party competition.⁴⁹

On the other hand, there is evidence suggesting that as party hierarchies, members of Congress, media outlets, and advocacy groups polarize, so gradually does much of the public. Voters become more aware of the differences between the parties, they are better able to locate themselves in relation to the parties, and they care more about the outcome of elections. As a result, their partisan preferences become better aligned with their ideological and policy preferences.⁵⁰ Marc J. Hetherington of Vanderbilt University

⁴⁹ Indeed, the evidence suggests that the shift between George W. Bush's relatively moderate 2000 campaign and a more conservative line in 2004 had the effect of further polarizing the electorate. There is little evidence, however, that underlying public attitudes on most basic issues shifted dramatically and durably in the course of these four years. See Alan Abramowitz and Walter Stone, "The Bush Effect: Polarization, Turnout, and Activism in the 2004 Presidential Election," paper prepared for the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

⁵⁰ For evidence and discussion on these points, see Mark Brewer, "The Rise of Partisanship and the Expansion of Partisan Conflict within the American Electorate," *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 58 no. 2 (June 2005), pp. 219-229; Gary Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support: The Electoral Connection," *Congress and the Presidency*, vol. 30 no. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 1-36; and Donald Baumer and

has shed light on how the mass “sorting” takes place: Voters (especially the attentive ones) exposed to the drumbeat of partisan and ideological disputes among opinion leaders eventually pick up their messages.⁵¹ The partisan polemics at the elite level signal what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican, and hence help voters align with the party whose position best approximates their own. Abetting people’s receptivity to political cues is the increased influence of education.⁵² In 1900, only 10 percent of young Americans went to high school. Today, 84 percent of adult Americans are high-school graduates, and almost 27 percent have graduated from college. “This extraordinary growth in schooling,” writes James Q. Wilson, “has produced an ever larger audience for political agitation.”

The interaction between elite cues and voters’ responses is complex and varied. A recent analysis suggests that voters, who have positioned themselves clearly on an issue, care intensely about it, and see important differences between the parties over it, choose sides accordingly. For other voters who care less about the given issue, party identification is the primary driver; when their party changes its position, they tend to change as well. And those voters who do not perceive differences between the parties (a

Howard Gold, “Party Images and Partisan Resurgence,” paper prepared for the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

⁵¹ Marc J. Hetherington, “Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 95 no. 3 (September 2001), pp. 619-631. See also, Abramowitz and Saunders, “Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate,” pp. 634-652, and Geoffrey C. Layman, “Ideological Realignment in Contemporary American Politics: The Case of Party Activists,” paper prepared for the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. In an important book published in 1992, the UCLA political scientist John R. Zaller had begun to explore how elite opinion affects mass opinion. John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵² See James Q. Wilson, “How Divided Are We?” *Commentary*, February 2006, especially p. 20.

diminishing share of the electorate) will likely change neither their party nor their existing position on the issue.⁵³

Thus far we have discussed issue-induced or partisan shifts among voters with prior positions. But elite polarization has another dimension—namely, its effects on young adults entering the electorate without fully formed preferences and attachments. In an important recent analysis of 1972-2004 National Election Study data, M. Kent Jennings and Laura Stoker find evidence that the increasingly polarized parties and their activists tend to polarize young adults, whose attitudes once formed tend to remain stable over a lifetime. Jennings and Stoker also find evidence that for young adults, new dimensions of polarization add to, rather than displace, older divisions: that is, race, gender, culture, and religion do not erase the impact of New Deal-based divisions about the role of government in the economy.⁵⁴ Especially in the case of the young, partisan polarization not only sorts, but also shapes, basic political orientations and party allegiances.

The cue-taking that has helped fuse ideology with party loyalty at the grass roots, in turn, reinforces the hyper-partisan style of candidates for elective office and their campaign strategies. Given the increasing proportion of the electorate that is sorted by ideology, mobilizing a party's core constituency, rather than trying to convert the uncommitted, looks (correctly or not) more and more like a winning strategy.⁵⁵ And that

⁵³ Thomas Carsey and Geoffrey Layman, "Changing Sides or Changing Minds? Party identification and Policy Preferences in the American Electorate," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50 no. 2 (April 2006).

⁵⁴ Jennings and Stoker, "Aging, Generations, and the development of Partisan Polarization in the United States" (copy on file with the authors)

⁵⁵ Matt Levendusky, "Sorting in the U.S. Mass Electorate," paper prepared for the 2005 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

means fielding hard-edged politicians appealing to, and certified by, the party's base. This electoral connection, and not just endogenous partisan incentives within institutions such as the House of Representatives, may help account for the increasingly polarized Congress of recent decades, and as Gary C. Jacobson has suggested, even a tendency of Democrats and Republicans therein to move further apart the longer they stay.⁵⁶

It would be a mistake, however, to see only one-way causality in the relation between changes at the elite and mass levels. History supports Jacobson's contention that political elites in search of a winning formula anticipate voters' potential responses to changed positions on the issues and are therefore constrained to some extent by that assessment. The Republican party's southern strategy reflected a judgment that Democratic support for civil rights had created an opportunity to shift voters and (eventually) party identification as well. The Democrats' transition from a moderate stance on abortion in 1976 to a less nuanced one by 1984 rested on a judgment that this move would attract the better-educated, younger, more upscale voters who had been activated politically by Vietnam and Watergate.⁵⁷

A feedback loop that mutually reinforces polarized comportment up and down the political food-chain has at least a couple of important implications. For one, the idea that self-inspired extremists are simply foisting polar choices on the wider public, while the

⁵⁶ See, for example Gary C. Jacobson, "Explaining the Ideological Polarization of the Congressional Parties Since the 1970s," paper prepared for the 2004 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association; "Party Polarization in National Politics: The Electoral Connection," in Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, eds., *Polarized Politics* (CQ Press, 2000); and "Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support: The Electoral Connection," *Congress and the Presidency*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 9-30. Importantly, Jacobson's findings apply to both the House and the Senate. For another view, see: Stephen Ansolabehere, James Snyder, Jr., and Charles Stewart, III, "Candidate Positioning in U.S. House Elections," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 45, no. 1 (January 2001).

⁵⁷ Jacobson, "Party Polarization in National Politics: The Electoral Connection," in Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, eds., *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2000).

latter holds its nose, does not quite capture what is going on. While it is possible to distinguish conceptually between polarization and sorting, the evidence suggests that over the past three decades these two phenomena cannot be entirely disentangled. Polarized politics are partly here, so to speak, by popular demand. And inasmuch as that is the case, undoing it may prove especially difficult—and perhaps not wholly appropriate.

Root Causes

Underlying the sharper demarcation of Democratic and Republican identities, from top to bottom, is a broad assortment of systemic forces, forces that will be the focus of several chapters in this volume. For now, a few of the main markers can be sketched. They include certain large historical transformations, the changing role of religion, the mass media, and the way representatives are elected to Congress.

Historical Transformations

First on the list has to be the regional realignment of the parties.⁵⁸ After Barry Goldwater carried five states in the deep South in 1964, it became clear that the Democratic party's lock on the region had loosened. The Republican ascent in the South accelerated in the wake of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which mobilized black voters and

⁵⁸ Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Mark D. Brewer, and Mack D. Mariani, *Diverging Parties: Realignment, Social Change, and Political Polarization* (Westview Press, 2004).

drove additional white conservatives out of the Democratic party.⁵⁹ As the Democrats lost their conservative southern base, they consolidated strength among more liberal constituencies prominent elsewhere—in particular, much of the Northeast and eventually California. At the same time, Republican moderates began losing their traditional foothold in regions such as New England, diminishing the party’s internal ballast against harder-line conservatives. The GOP, now anchored in the South and West, became more orthodox.⁶⁰

The famous *Roe v. Wade* decision exacerbated party divisions. In 1972, the year before *Roe*, neither party’s platform even mentioned abortion. In 1976, both parties held moderate (and nearly interchangeable) positions. Over the next two presidential cycles, however, activists in the two parties moved farther away from one another, and by 1984 the party platforms had settled into the polarized extremes that have persisted over the past two decades.⁶¹

Ronald Reagan further clarified the Republican agenda, championing bold tax cuts, retrenchment of the welfare state, and not least, a much more muscular national defense than the Democrats advocated. The latter consideration warrants more attention than has been paid by much historiography on the transformative events defining modern American party politics.⁶² The Vietnam War, and later the lowering of East-West tensions, shattered the bipartisan unity that had prevailed in foreign policy through much

⁵⁹ David Rohde, “Electoral Forces, Political Agendas, and Partisanship in the House and Senate,” in Roger Davidson, ed., *The Postreform Congress* (St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

⁶⁰ See Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁶¹ For a more detailed account of this change, see William A. Galston, “Incomplete Victory: The Rise of the New Democrats,” in Peter Berkowitz, ed., *Varieties of Progressivism* (Hoover Institution, 2004).

of the Cold War. The Democrats moved left. The party's standard-bearer in 1972, it should be recalled, proposed slashing the U.S. defense budget by one-third. Soon after, the Democratic majority leader in the Senate was to be the author of a legislative proposal calling for drastic reductions of U.S. forces in Europe. By 1983, when the Reagan administration was determined to deploy Pershing missiles in Europe to counterbalance the Soviet Union's provocative deployment of its intermediate-range missiles, Democratic majorities in the House of Representatives were adopting resolutions supporting a nuclear freeze. Deviations like these signaled to the party bases a growing contrast—one that would reach its starkest manifestation seven years later, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and most Democratic senators declined to approve the use of force against the aggressor.

The end of the Cold War ushered in what one of us has called “the age of low politics.”⁶³ Relieved of the need to pull together in the face of a great external threat, the political parties now could afford to pull apart—and to wrangle about every manner of domestic issue, regardless how parochial, petty, or picayune. Thus, luxuriating in their holiday from foreign affairs, the congressional parties indulged in long and bitter quarrels over matters such as raising the minimum wage by a few cents or the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. (For all but four House Republicans in 1998, impeaching the president had become an *idée fixe*. One wonders whether their zest for it would have been quite so unsparing if the fall of 1998 had been, say, the fall of 1962, when the country and the world stood at the brink of nuclear annihilation.)

⁶² On what follows, see Pietro S. Nivola, “Commercializing Foreign Affairs? American Trade Policy After the Cold War,” in Randall B. Ripley and James M. Lindsay, eds., *U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), p. 250.

Intensifying the partisan squabbles has been the extraordinary parity of the competitors. With the parties evenly matched, unusually small margins now make the difference between winning and losing the presidency, the House, or the Senate. With so much riding on marginal changes in party support, it is not surprising to see both sides clawing to gain an edge by whatever means are deemed effective. Hence, if the GOP can add a few seats to its majority in the House by manipulating congressional district lines in Texas, the opportunity is seized without hesitation. When the Democratic opposition spots a chance to trip up a Republican president's judicial nominees, it frequently doesn't seem to hesitate either. When competing in a dead heat, anything goes.

The news media thrive on the perpetual feuding because partisan machinations, stridency, and acrimony make good copy.⁶⁴ This calculation, of course, is not new, but several factors appear to have heightened it in recent times. The mainstream media—the three old-line broadcast networks and the national newspapers—have more rivals. The number of Americans receiving their news from network television or daily newspapers has been declining steadily.⁶⁵ Internet outlets, talk radio stations, and cable channels, pitching to narrow cultural and politically-attentive audiences, have proliferated. This niche-oriented industry increasingly resembles a high-tech cousin of the combative partisan press of the nineteenth century—a development further facilitated by the repeal of the fairness doctrine.

⁶³ Pietro S. Nivola, "Can the Government Be Serious?" in Henry J. Aaron, James M. Lindsay, and Pietro S. Nivola, eds., *Agenda for the Nation* (Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 488-494.

⁶⁴ Robert J. Samuelson, "How Polarization Sells," *Washington Post*, June 30, 2004.

⁶⁵ Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media: An Annual Report on American Journalism." (Washington, D.C.: Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005).

Of course, it is far from self-evident which side—politicized journalism or its publics—is the principal agent driving deeper wedges. The new media are cultivating their particular partisan and ideological markets but are also responding to the emergence of those markets.⁶⁶ The latter, in turn, reflect changes underway in the mass electorate.

The Role of Religion

One such change pertains to the role of religious voters. To be sure, religion has always played a prominent part in U.S. politics, and we would be hard-pressed to claim that its significance today is more notable than were the sectarian political currents in the past. At one time, denominational distinctions—Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, Baptists and Lutherans—had a strong partisan cast. Those patterns have waned. But a new one has clearly emerged: The contrast between the voting behavior of the most active worshippers and everybody else in the last four presidential elections has widened compared to modern historical levels. From 1952 through 1988, Democratic presidential candidates tended to fare only about two percentage points worse among regular churchgoers than among voters who attended church infrequently, if at all. Starting in 1992, the religion gap grew to nearly 12 points on average.⁶⁷ The most

⁶⁶ See James T. Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁶⁷ Galston and Kamarck, *The Politics of Polarization*, pp. 43, 47. For parallel findings based on white voters only, see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, pp. 132-34.

religiously observant voters, almost irrespective of denomination, leaned to the Republican standard-bearer in the 2000 election, and even more so in 2004.⁶⁸ The reason is straightforward: Religious observance and political preference now are powerfully correlated.⁶⁹ More than half of those who attend church weekly call themselves conservatives, four times the percentage who regard themselves as liberals. What has sent regular churchgoers to the right is the undeniable impact (on them) of the abortion issue most notably but increasingly also other social and cultural concerns such as sex education and school prayer.⁷⁰

We are not yet convinced that faith-based forces have necessarily polarized the political parties more than other factors have.⁷¹ The divorce between the adherents of “hard” versus “soft” stances on questions of national security, for example, strikes us as no less consequential. Notice, moreover, that potent faith-based constituencies do not *always* skew a party’s policies to the right. Religious conservatives in the Republican ranks, for example, have favored increasing anti-poverty programs, even if it means more

⁶⁸ See Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, p. 131, and Galston and Kamarck, *The Politics of Polarization*, p. 48.

⁶⁹ See Alan S. Miller and John P. Hoffman, “The Growing Divisiveness: Culture Wars or a War of Words?” *Social Forces*, vol. 78, no. 2 (December 1999), pp. 721-752.

⁷⁰ Bartels finds that the impact of social issues on party affiliation and presidential preference among regular church-attenders has more than doubled since 1984. Larry Bartels, “What’s the Matter with *What’s the Matter with Kansas*,” paper prepared for the 2005 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Abortion remains the great wedge issue, splitting frequent church-attending white voters and those who seldom or never attend. The former oppose legal abortion by 69 percent; the latter by only 22 percent. Abramowitz and Saunders, “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along?” p. 17. On how polarization between self-described conservatives and liberals seems to have broadened to encompass additional cultural issues, see Evans, “Have Americans’ Attitudes Become More Polarized?—an Update,” pp. 16-18, 30-32.

⁷¹ Some multivariate analysis does suggest, though, that church attendance has had an increasingly distinct impact on voting. This appears to have been particularly the case in 2004. See *Trends 2005* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2005), p. 29.

debt or higher taxes, as well as stricter environmental standards, and foreign aid to combat HIV/AIDS.⁷²

Also, pure polarization implies a symmetrical dynamic, in which more or less equally robust blocs of voters on *both* sides of the political spectrum are gravitating toward the poles. But while religious traditionalists appear to be flocking to the Republican party, “the true loyalists” (in Stanley Greenberg’s phrase) of the Democratic party include more than secularists.⁷³ Millions of Protestants, “modernist” evangelicals, Vatican II Catholics, and non-Orthodox Jews regularly vote Democratic. Indeed, while losing the Evangelical Protestant by more than 3 to 1, John Kerry split the Mainline Protestant vote precisely down the middle with George W. Bush.⁷⁴ This reality probably constrains the party from embracing a maximally secular agenda, even though the Democratic base is certainly loaded with staunch secularists.

Nonetheless, the concentration of fervent fundamentalists at the core of the Republican party unquestionably matters. At a minimum, it has ensured that key symbolic issues—*Roe v. Wade*, end-of-life decisions, “intelligent design,” bioethics, and so forth—form a distinct partisan fault-line. And the valance of such issues for the party bases seems unlikely to diminish any time soon. Of course, these issues could recede somewhat if cross-cutting concerns that traditionally animated voters—perhaps most

⁷² The Pew Research Center has developed a three-part classification of respondents with GOP allegiances. One of the groups, characterized by frequent attendance at church, bible study, or prayer group meetings, appeared to be overwhelmingly (80 percent) in favor of the proposition that “the government should do more to help needy Americans even if it means going deeper into debt.” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Beyond Red vs. Blue: Republicans Divided About the Role of Government—Democrats by Social and Personal Values*, (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2005), p. 25.

⁷³ Stan Greenberg, *The Two Americas: Our Current Deadlock and How to Break it* (St. Martin’s Press, 2004).

notably, economic ones—regain their former dominance. Although voting behavior continues to correlate with income levels, the dominance of pocketbook issues has declined relative to various other issues.⁷⁵ Indeed, there is considerable debate now about the actual political weight of economic concerns.⁷⁶ As both parties became “Keynesians” and learned to tame the business cycle, unemployment may have faded somewhat as a determinant in American elections. In the 22 years that spanned November 1982 and election day 2004, the U.S. economy was in recession a mere twentieth of the time. The political economy was altogether different in the four decades preceding 1982; then, recessions afflicted the electorate more than a fifth of the time. We might thus expect cultural themes with their religious overtones to remain prominent.

How Congress Gets Elected

In the 15 elections for the House of Representatives following World War II, one party or the other gained an average of 29 seats. In the past 15 elections, the average switch was 12 seats. By 2004, less than 10 percent of the House was being seriously contested. When the votes were counted, the composition of even gigantic delegations,

⁷⁴ See John Green, Corwin Smidt, James Guth, and Lyman Kellstedt, “The American Religious Landscape and the 2004 Presidential Vote: Increased Polarization,” *Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics*, University of Akron, November-December 2004.

⁷⁵ See Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, p. 136.

⁷⁶ Bartels, in his paper “What’s the Matter with *What’s the Matter with Kansas*,” argues that white voters in the bottom third of the income distribution remain reliably Democratic, presumably because these voters remain preoccupied with long-standing economic concerns. Bartels, “What’s the Matter with *What’s the Matter with Kansas*,” p. 1. Along similar lines, see Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal and Nolan McCarty, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (forthcoming). Still, perceptions of economic self-interest, and the total shares of voters choosing a party affiliation for reasons of economic insecurity or risk-averseness, may not be quite the same in the post-Keynesian age.

such as California's, proved immutable. (*None* of California's 53 seats changed hands in 2004.) Competitive districts are vanishing.⁷⁷

Exactly what has eroded congressional electoral competition is the subject of much scholarly debate. One school of thought points to the way districts are delineated. Increasingly sophisticated computer software has refined the ability of political cartographers to map with pinpoint precision the spatial distribution of voters needed to maximize partisan advantage, and then to gerrymander the boundaries accordingly.⁷⁸ Another school stresses the power of incumbency: The unmatched capacity of incumbents to bankroll their re-elections is at an all-time high.⁷⁹ Still another emphasizes the dynamics of political segregation: Politically homogenized districts develop when voters tip the balance by moving to be near fellow partisans.⁸⁰

The alternative explanations hinge in part on methodological subtleties. To assess the impact of gerrymanders on the relative competitiveness of districts, for example, Emory University's Alan Abramowitz looks at the normalized presidential vote within

⁷⁷ Earlier in this essay, we had noted that a number of red-state congressional delegations is composed of Democratic as well as Republican members. A caveat: a few of these Democrats hold safe seats, in carefully contoured minority districts. Thus, the state delegations can appear to be more mixed than they otherwise would be.

⁷⁸ See Bruce E. Cain, "Assessing the Partisan Effects of Redistricting," *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 79 no. 2 (June 1985), pp. 320-333 and Harry Basehart and John Comer, "Redistricting and Incumbent Reelection Success in Five State Legislatures," *American Politics Quarterly*, vol. 23 (1995), pp. 229-40 and Andrew Gelman and Gary King, "Enhancing Democracy through Legislative Redistricting," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 88 no. 3 (September 1994), pp. 541-59.

⁷⁹ Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (Longman Classics, 2003)

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Bruce I. Oppenheimer, "Deep Red and Blue Congressional Districts: The Causes and Consequences of Declining Party Competitiveness," in Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered*, 8th ed. (CQ Press, 2005), pp. 153-155. Also see Bill Bishop, "The Schism in U.S. Politics Begins at Home," *The Austin American-Statesman*, April 4, 2004.

districts before and after each redistricting (following each decennial census).⁸¹ He reckons that if partisan redistricting were the reason for the decline in competitive races, the number of competitive districts should have fallen every time. Finding no such decrease in 1992, he argues that other factors must be at work in the long-term loss of competitiveness. Complicating Abramowitz's inference, however, is the effect of a significant third party candidate, Ross Perot, in the 1992 election. Perot drew down the vote shares for both the major party candidates, thus making it seem as if more districts had been contestable.

Whatever the source of non-competitive elections, a profusion of one-party districts drives moderates out of Congress.⁸² For there, candidates have little incentive to reach out to voters across party lines. The imperative, instead, becomes to appeal to the base, and preempt possible primary challenges from the extremes.

The direct primary (or threat thereof), not the general election, becomes the defining political event. In theory, in a simple two-party electoral system the natural tendency of candidates competing for single member districts is to move toward the center of the spectrum. But the balloting in primaries often discourages this convergence. The electorate in these contests tends to be small (under 18 percent even in presidential primaries), unrepresentative, and highly motivated. Candidates protect their flanks by

⁸¹ Alan I. Abramowitz, Brad Alexander, and Matthew Gunning, "Incumbency, Redistricting, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections," paper prepared for the 2005 annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association.

⁸² For a contrary view, see David C. King, "Congress, Polarization, and Fidelity to the Median Voter," paper prepared for the 1999 Massachusetts Institute of Technology Conference on Parties and Congress.

positioning themselves further to the left or right of the general public on issues that the primary clientele regards as litmus tests.⁸³

The number of Democratic party primaries for House seats has remained about the same since 1964, but on the Republican side, the number has risen steeply since then, and the dreaded *chance* of being ousted in a primary, however long the odds, chills would-be centrists in both parties. The unintended consequences of this institution in American elections have given pause to political scientists since V.O. Key began calling attention to its risks some fifty years ago. Particularly where inter-party competition is lacking (as in many congressional districts), the direct primary stokes the process of polarization.

So What?

When all is said and done, the developments we have reviewed to this point are only cause for serious concern if they can be demonstrated to imperil the democratic process, the bedrock of its governing institutions, and the prospects of attending to urgent policy priorities. That demonstration is anything but unambiguous or simple to supply.

To begin with, some of what passes for dysfunctional polarization actually may be little more than the downside of unified party control of the executive and legislative branches. Unified government, as in the first six years of the Bush presidency but also the first two of the Clinton presidency—permitted partisans to move their political agendas further to the left or right than would otherwise have been possible. Divided

⁸³ While this “primary threat” thesis is intuitively plausible, the direct evidence supporting it is thin at best. Much rests on the extent to which incumbents act preemptively to ward off challenges that would otherwise

party control of government, on the other hand, compels accommodation. The GOP's victory in 1994, for example, pushed Clinton toward the center. If the Democrats had regained at least one chamber of Congress in 2004, the result almost certainly would have been to force Bush farther onto middle ground in his second term. Divided government, in short, can temper a "polarizing" president.

Whether such tempering is always for the best is debatable. (Try to picture, hypothetically, a tempered Abraham Lincoln "triangulating" with a Democratic House or Senate in 1862.) Partisan polarization can have advantages, not just liabilities. Inasmuch as the Democratic and Republican parties differ more visibly, they offer voters "a choice, not an echo," to borrow Goldwater's words. There is something to be said for that clarification. Was the public philosophy of the Democrats more intelligible in the days when the party had to accommodate the likes of Southern segregationists under its big tent? For years political scientists had lamented the lack of a "responsible" party system in the United States. Now, with the political parties more coherent, centralized, unified, and disciplined—in sum, a bit more reminiscent of the majoritarian style in some European parliamentary regimes—analysts and pundits rhapsodize about the days of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and their old incongruous ad hoc coalitions, deference to seniority and debilitating filibusters, weaker legislative party leadership, and often sloppy bipartisan compromises.⁸⁴

Accountability

occur. Only sophisticated interviewing can document these "non-events."

⁸⁴ Just how cohesive and disciplined the congressional parties really are these days is a very debatable matter. After Tom Delay ceased to be the Republican majority leader, the House Republicans began

But what if a good deal of the public agenda is being hijacked by the polarized militants that rule the parties or, at any rate, densely populate their bases? Surely, as many critics have argued, there have been glaring episodes of this sort. The Clinton impeachment imbroglio was one. In December 1998, the House of Representatives voted to sack the president, with 98 percent of the Republican members concluding that Clinton's conduct rose to the level of high crime. This verdict of "the people's house" did not align with the views of the people. From the eruption of the year-long sex scandal in January 1998 through the end of the Senate trial in February 1999, every national poll showed the public opposed to impeachment and conviction, typically by margins of two to one.⁸⁵ Last year's congressional intervention in the Terri Schiavo feeding-tube case provided another unsettling illustration of how Congress could lurch in one direction while lopsided majorities in public opinion polls leaned the other way.

Occasionally, the policy outcomes have seemed disconnected from prevailing public preferences in less ephemeral controversies as well. For quite a few years, passage of national energy legislation was held hostage in part by an unresolved dispute of far greater interest to strict environmentalists than to average motorists: namely, whether to permit exploration for oil and gas anywhere in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve. Similarly, a minority view presently governs stem cell research. As much as 58 percent of the public would prefer to allow research that might result in new cures for diseases

resembling, at crucial times, the disheveled majorities of yore—unable even to agree on a federal budget in the spring of 2006, for instance.

⁸⁵ See Gary C. Jacobson, "Party Polarization in the National Elections: The Electoral Connection," in Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, eds., *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era* (CQ Press, 2000), p. 10.

than to preserve the human embryos used in the process.⁸⁶ Yet, so far, the opponents have held the upper hand, limiting government-funded research only to existing cell lines from embryos that have already been destroyed.

Exhibits like these are proof perfect to many critics that the political process is now routinely out of touch and unaccountable. But is it? So sweeping a verdict remains unwarranted unless the data supporting it can be taken to scale; a much wider range of policy debates has to be parsed, and they have to include truly big-ticket items, not primarily small-bore questions like the Schiavo flap or even the Lewinsky spectacle.

A recent attempt to do just that is the engaging book, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of Democracy*, by Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson. In this ambitious treatise, the authors argue that mainstream popular sentiments failed to inform, much less decide, virtually every major policy initiative of the GOP during the George W. Bush presidency.⁸⁷ According to Hacker and Pierson, for example, the prescription drug bill, Bush's energy legislation, and the proposed reform of Social Security—these adventures, and more—were pushed relentlessly on a non-consenting public.

Arguably, however, just the opposite was the case. The addition of prescription drug benefits to Medicare was a Bush campaign promise in 2000. More than anything else, its inspiration came from his strategy of “compassionate conservatism”—an effort to attract middle-of-the-road voters by co-opting the Democrats on an issue dear to them. The Bush administration's energy proposals reflected, for the most part, *precisely* what American consumers really demand—namely, continued production of low-cost energy,

⁸⁶ Pew Center for the People and the Press, *The 2004 Political Landscape: Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2004), p. 10.

and no meaningful pressure to conserve it. Hacker and Pierson claim that strong majorities preferred something called “conservation.”⁸⁸ But an expressed preference for that slogan signifies next to nothing. The effective method for saving fuel is a rising price, either induced by free-market forces or by taxes, both of which are inimical to most voters. Bush’s Social Security plan went nowhere, partly because it met unified resistance from the Democrats but more fundamentally because most Americans were opposed to it.⁸⁹ As for the Bush foreign policy, the Iraq project—in fact, the president’s whole approach to foreign affairs—was basically put to a referendum in the elections of 2002 and 2004. In short, realistically assessed, none of these upshots turns out to have been an affront to popular sovereignty.

Gridlock?

Maybe the critique of policymaking in a polarized political environment has to take a different tack: The trouble is not that the government is out of step with the people but that it’s not getting much done in their interest, whether they like it or not.⁹⁰

The public may not relish the hard choices that are needed to ensure the solvency or soundness of the Social Security system, but serious policymakers have to see them

⁸⁷ Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of Democracy* (Yale University Press, 2005).

⁸⁸ Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, p. 83.

⁸⁹ Interestingly, the Bush Social Security venture might have stirred less public skepticism if it had been sold in a stealthier manner. Bush did *not* claim that private accounts would fix the program’s eventual insolvency. That bit of honesty was commendable, but it led people to wonder why the privatization was a pressing imperative in the first place. We are indebted to our Brookings colleague Peter Orszag for this insight.

⁹⁰ For a recent work, finding evidence that elite polarization leads to some forms of policy deadlock, see Nolan McCarty, *The Policy Consequences of Partisan Polarization in the Untied States* (forthcoming).

through anyway. The public may not welcome the pain that a genuine energy conservation plan—a stiffer excise tax on gasoline, say—inflicts, but policymakers do society a disservice if they perennially chicken out. It may well be that intensely partisan politics throw up additional roadblocks to certain *unpopular* measures that a responsible government ought to take for the sake of the public good in the long run. We will circle back to this important consideration shortly. Beforehand, though, we urge caution against the conventional supposition that political polarization (at least to its present extent) is necessarily a recipe for policy paralysis.

Whatever else the overall legislative record of recent years may show, sclerosis has not been a distinguishing characteristic. Reform of the welfare system, substantial tax reductions, big trade agreements, a great expansion of federal intervention in local public education, important course corrections in foreign policy, reorganization of the intelligence bureaus, a significant campaign finance law, new rules governing bankruptcy and class-action litigation, a huge new cabinet department, massive enlargement of Medicare—for better or worse, all these milestones, and others, were achieved despite polarized politics.

Some of these exploits probably were only possible *because* of disciplined (“polarized”) voting by the congressional majority party, as the work of David Brady and Craig Volden’s would predict.⁹¹ (That was certainly true of the 2003 tax bill, for example.)⁹² Several, though, occurred because partisan polarities, though significant on many issues, were not consistently so dramatic and all-encompassing as to grind the

⁹¹ David Brady and Craig Volden, *Revolving Gridlock* (Westview Press, 1998).

⁹² The Republican vote on this second round of Bush tax reductions was 224 to 1 in the House, and 48 to 3 in the Senate.

wheels of government to a full stop. It is not always easy, as a matter of fact, to find brilliant daylight between the official postures of the political parties.

Take the Republicans. There was a time when limited government was a distinguishing aspiration of Republican presidents and congressional leaders. That austere orientation lost allure after January 1996, with the debacle of the government shutdown. Today, big spending and big bureaucracy are hallmarks of the politically chastened GOP. Witness the party's complicity in the largest expansion of an entitlement program (the Medicare drug benefit) in forty years, the profligacy of the Republican-controlled Congress on everything from highways and farm subsidies to reconstruction assistance for the Gulf states inundated by Hurricane Katrina, the king-sized Department of Homeland Security, the stiff statism of the USA Patriot Act, and the No Child Left Behind law's federal tutelage of local education policy.⁹³ By the time President Bush delivered his State of the Union address in January of 2006, some of his themes (about "addiction to oil," for example, and an alleged need to bolster America's "competitiveness") sounded as if they had been lifted from the scripts of Democratic administrations and congressional leaders in decades past.

The Democrats, to be sure, have dissented on more than a few high-profile matters—for example, by defending the status quo for Social Security, second-guessing the Bush administration's policy on Iraq, and nationalizing end-of-life rules for fetuses but not for the sources of embryonic stem cells or for patients in vegetative states. But

⁹³ To quote Representative Jeff Flake, Republican of Arizona, "the material that [now] comes from the Republican caucus is not to call for the elimination of this program or that, it's to brag that we have increased the budget for education by 144 percent." See Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "The Revolution that Wasn't," *New York Times*, February 13, 2005. The 2005 transportation bill was larded with 6,000 pet projects at a cost of \$286 billion. In the fall of 2005, the supposedly disciplined Republican-led House

more than is commonly acknowledged, the two parties also appear to have crawled toward common ground on a number of sensitive issues.

However hard it was for many Democrats to swallow, say, welfare reform in the mid-1990s, it is fair to say that this once-defining dispute had been taken off the table by the end of the decade.⁹⁴ Similarly, the crime issue, which the Republicans had exploited so effectively in the 1988 election, subsequently lost much of its partisan luster.

Helpfully, crime rates declined, but also the Democrats inoculated themselves by enacting in 1994 a far-reaching anti-crime bill.

In the 2004 election cycle, no serious contender for the Democratic presidential nomination campaigned to overturn the 1996 welfare law. For all their gripes about tax cuts “for the rich,” the Democrats effectively embraced much of Bush’s tax reduction. True, Senator Kerry favored bringing the top tax rate on incomes above \$200,000 back up to 39.6 percent, but that would still have been a far cry from the 70 percent rate the President Reagan had slashed. The Democrats fumed that, over the ensuing ten years, a \$1.352 trillion deficit loomed on account of the Bush administration’s fiscal policies. Meanwhile, Kerry’s proposed tax and spending package was estimated to spill almost exactly the same amount of red ink (\$1.306 trillion).⁹⁵ Bush came out against same-sex

proved unable to reduce the growth in mandatory government spending by even as little as one-tenth of 1 percent.

⁹⁴ The decline of various formerly divisive issues, and the partisan convergence on some of them, has been observed by, among others, E.J. Dionne, Jr., in his well-known book, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), for instance, pp. 17-19. Dionne notes that welfare reform was clearly one such issue for the Democrats. The earned income tax credit was one for the Republicans. Concurring with President Clinton’s expansion of that program, Bush in 2000 affirmed that slowing its payments would “balance the budget on the backs of the poor.” For his part, Al Gore wound up endorsing government assistance, within limits, to the work of religious charities. And the Republicans at the end of the Clinton years were proposing nearly as much federal spending on education as the Democrats.

⁹⁵ Jonathan Weisman, “Kerry’s Dueling Promises on Economy,” *Washington Post*, August 25, 2004. The composition, of course, was different. Kerry proposed more than \$770 billion in new spending over the course of the decade, Bush much less. Bush’s tax cuts were estimated to reduce revenue by more than a

marriages—but so did Kerry. And later, on the red-hot issue of immigration policy, key liberal Democrats such as Senator Edward M. Kennedy sought and shared middle ground with George W. Bush.

There has been enough partisan convergence (albeit selective, tenuous, opportunistic, or episodic) to secure key pieces of legislation. Lest we forget, the 2001 tax cut would not have passed if an abundance of Democratic senators hadn't voted for it.⁹⁶ That fall, a total of 193 Democratic lawmakers joined 260 Republicans embracing the Patriot Act. One hundred and twenty-nine Democrats sided with 255 Republicans to create the Homeland Security behemoth. Fifty-two Republicans voted with 246 Democrats to enact the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform. In both chambers, Republicans and Democrats voted in almost equal numbers to adopt the No Child Left Behind scheme.⁹⁷ In July 2002, the Sarbanes-Oxley rules for corporate governance were enacted almost unanimously by both chambers.⁹⁸

Displays of bipartisanship, often yielding decidedly centrist results, have not stopped there. With enough Republican defections, majorities in both chambers declined to approve a constitutional amendment barring gay marriages.⁹⁹ The Central American Free Trade Agreement would not have been ratified comfortably in the summer of 2005

trillion dollars, Kerry's tax plans represented about half-a-trillion dollars in reduced revenue. Robert Pear, "2 Rivals Push Domestic Plans, But Say Little of Big Price Tag," *New York Times*, October 13, 2004.

⁹⁶ Twelve Democrats sided with 46 Republicans.

⁹⁷ This roll call was particularly striking. In the House, 198 Democrats and 183 Republicans voted for the Bush No Child Left Behind bill. In the Senate, the bill garnered 43 Democrats along with 44 Republicans.

⁹⁸ The vote on Sarbanes-Oxley, July 25th, was unanimous in the Senate and 423 to 3 in the House.

⁹⁹ In the House, for example, 27 Republicans voted against the amendment with 158 Democrats and one Independent. The vote fell 49 short of the required two-thirds for adoption. The 27 GOP defections were enough to confirm that the gay-marriage ban would not come down to a neat party-line vote.

if 11 Democratic senators had not voted with the Republican majority.¹⁰⁰ A nearly-unanimous Senate voted to set new limits on the interrogation of detainees suspected of terrorism.¹⁰¹ Liberal interest groups and evangelicals have teamed up to lobby for projects like the Aspire Act, an anti-poverty bill cosponsored by senators Jon Corzine (Democrat of New Jersey) and Rick Santorum (Republican of Pennsylvania).¹⁰² The Republican-led House—a body alleged to be the wholly owned subsidiary of the Christian right—passed a stem cell research bill more liberal than the Bush administration’s policy.¹⁰³

Congress: Hell’s Kitchen?

Even if the contemporary Congress has been productive, its deliberative process may not be pretty—and some prominent scholars are convinced that the sausage-making activities, if not the sausages themselves, are uglier now than they used to be. Lawmaking by “stealth,” these writers submit, has become standard operating procedure, resulting in less transparency, more cooking of cost-estimations and budget numbers, greater use of sleepers tucked into omnibus packages, closed rules, the drafting of

¹⁰⁰ Reflecting the enduring residue of the NAFTA debate as well as heightened partisan divisions, however, only a handful of House Democrats supported CAFTA. Even normally pro-trade “New Democrats” voted against it in droves.

¹⁰¹ Forty-six Republicans, 43 Democrats and one Independent supported the bill.

¹⁰² Ray Boshara, “Share the Ownership,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 2005.

¹⁰³ Fifty Republicans sided with 187 Democrats. The bill would allow stem cells to be derived from human embryos that have been donated from in vitro fertilization clinics, were created for the purposes of fertility treatments, and exceeded the clinical need of the individuals seeking such treatments.

legislation in oligarchic conference committees, and in most instances, imperious exclusion of the parliamentary minority.¹⁰⁴

We defer to other contributors in the Brookings-Hoover study to thoroughly substantiate, modify, or reject that gloomy assessment. A dispassionate analysis, however, will have to steer clear of clichés.

One presumably simple gauge of the impact of heightened partisanship on congressional deliberations is a measurable increase in petulance. In floor debates, for instance, the number of words ruled either out of order or “taken down” rose after 1995.¹⁰⁵ The incivility is vexing, yet surely some of what Democrats regard as uncivil conduct by their congressional adversaries these days simply has to do with Democratic party’s uncustomary minority status.¹⁰⁶

Arguably a good deal of procedural fairness has been lost in the contemporary Congress. When the Democrats were in power, they were known to stretch roll calls in the House from the customary 15 minutes to 30 in order to marshal the votes needed to pass the party’s preferred budget legislation. Republicans, including then-Representative Dick Cheney, deplored this practice and called it a serious abuse of power. Since 2001,

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, pp. 154-155; Paul J. Quirk, “Deliberation and Decision Making,” in Paul J. Quirk and Sarah A. Binder, eds., *Institutions of American Democracy: The Legislative Branch* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Thomas E. Mann and Norman Ornstein, *The Broken Branch* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Barbara Sinclair, *Partisan Polarization and the Politics of the National Policy-Making Process* (forthcoming).

¹⁰⁵ Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Erika Falk, “Continuity and Change in Civility in the House,” in Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, eds., *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era* (CQ Press, 2000), p. 106.

¹⁰⁶ Expressing the views of many Democrats, Representative David Price (Democrat of North Carolina) declared that party discipline enforced by the Republican leadership has “gone beyond its proper bounds.” Quoted in David S. Broder, “The Polarization Express,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 2004.

however, House Republican leaders have sometimes held votes open for hours.¹⁰⁷

Republicans may have felt powerless in conference committees when Democrats were the ruling majority, but these days the Republican majority has gone a step further, not infrequently excluding Democratic members altogether. Still, some of the Democrats' grievances are reminiscent of those harbored by the old House Republicans who spent professional lifetimes marginalized before 1995.¹⁰⁸ The parallels aside, an unfamiliar degree of majority party cohesion, discipline, bicameral coordination, and central control is bound to beget a discontented minority.¹⁰⁹

There is, of course, some irony in this situation. Unhappy Congress watchers nowadays sometimes seem to lament the same "new" institutional practices that liberal observers fifty years ago would have welcomed. Consider: Presently the end of the seniority system for committee chairmanships is seen as regrettable. Ambitious members seeking these jobs tend to be hardliners who have ingratiated themselves to the party leadership. A half-century ago, on the other hand, the complaint among progressives was that Congress could not move priorities such as civil rights legislation because party leaders and caucuses were powerless to dislodge obstructionist Southern chairmen of the House Rules Committee and the judiciary committees.

The minority in the 109th Congress, moreover, was far from feeble. Showing unusual solidarity, the Democrats successfully thwarted Bush's Social Security plan as well as some other legislation important to president. The parliamentary tactics of the

¹⁰⁷ Norman Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, "If You Give a Congressman a Cookie," *The New York Times*, January 19 2006.

¹⁰⁸ William F. Connelly, Jr., and John J. Pitney, *Congress's Permanent Minority? Republicans in the U.S. House* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1994).

party leadership in the Senate were at least partly responsible for the failure of Congress to clear, among other key measures, a compromise immigration bill in the spring of 2006.¹¹⁰ In the House, the Democrats, like the Republicans, empowered their leadership to discourage dissent. Stray members inclined to work too closely with the GOP were threatened with the loss of committee seats.¹¹¹

A crucial component of the deliberative activity of Congress is the oversight function. Congressional oversight of the executive branch has faltered in the past half-dozen years.¹¹² Some missteps by the intelligence agencies and bureaus charged with homeland security, for instance, might have been averted if congressional watchdogs had performed their duties more assiduously. Yet, how much of this abdication can be imputed to “polarization,” rather than simply the effects of unified party control of both branches, is by no means an easy call. It is inaccurate, furthermore, to portray the Republican-controlled Congress as invariably supine. Early in 2006, for example, an investigating committee of the House issued a report on the executive’s response to the Katrina disaster. A more blistering congressional critique of executive mismanagement in modern times would be hard to find.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ On institutional changes that over time have facilitated party discipline, see, for instance, David Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹¹⁰ The minority leadership refused to allow votes on conservative amendments to a Senate bill that probably had enough support to remain intact, and that might have resulted in a reasonable compromise with the House.

¹¹¹ Jim VandeHei and Charles Babington, “Newly Emboldened Congress Has Dogged Bush This Year,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 2005, p. A5.

¹¹² See, for instance, on this point Barbara Sinclair, “Parties and Leadership in the House,” in Quirk and Binder, *The Legislative Branch*, p. 251.

¹¹³ *A Failure of Initiative*, Hearings before the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, House of Representatives, 109 Cong. 2 sess. (GPO, 2006). In another indication that Congress was reaffirming its oversight responsibilities in 2006, the Senate Intelligence Committee led by Senator Pat Roberts (Republican of Kansas) broke with the Bush administration’s approach to its domestic eavesdropping program.

It is said that partisan polarization impedes lawmakers from adequately scrubbing, sanitizing, or simplifying their legislation. The prescription drugs provisions are cited as an egregious example. But how does this charge stack up against the counterfactual? Suppose the half-trillion-dollar drug bill had not been flogged by GOP powerbrokers but crafted instead in a convivial bipartisan fashion. It might well have emerged just as flawed, and almost certainly more extravagant.

Today's sorry legislative stories should be benchmarked by yesterday's. Think back to the Carter years and the stupendously convoluted National Energy Act of 1978, or further back, to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society's Community Action Program and the Model Cities law. Those enactments were legendary for their unanticipated complications and consequences.¹¹⁴ It is easy, in other words, to commit what could be called the Golden Age fallacy about Capitol Hill. The entrenched Democratic barons who dominated the legislative branch four or five decades ago were just as capable of making a hash of congressional projects (as they did, with fatal consequences later on, in the flood planes of Louisiana, for instance).¹¹⁵

All this suggests that, at a minimum, the much-bewailed partisan divide in American politics may not have impaired the democratic policy process quite as consummately as many believe.

¹¹⁴ On the Community Action Program, see for example, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's classic, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (MacMillan Publishing Company, 1970). On the Carter energy legislation, see Pietro S. Nivola, *The Politics of Energy Conservation* (Brookings Institution Press, 1986).

¹¹⁵ For an eerie reminder of this epoch and its underside, see the extraordinary account by Michael Grunwald and Susan B. Glasser, "The Slow Drowning of New Orleans," *Washington Post*, October 9, 2005.

Four Risks

To say that the impairment has been exaggerated is not to conclude, however, that there is none at all. Increased polarization of the political parties carries at least four kinds of risks. It complicates the task of addressing certain long-range domestic policy problems, particularly the big ones that cannot be solved without altering the established distribution of benefits in the modern welfare state. Second, it can mar the implementation of a steady, resolute foreign policy and national security strategy. Third, partisan excesses can do lasting damage to vulnerable institutions, most notably the judiciary. Finally, there is the distinct possibility that partisan antagonisms, and especially the slash-and-burn tactics that polarized parties routinely adopt, erode public trust in government.

Restructuring Entitlements: From Tall Order to Mission Impossible

The United States, like many other countries, will not be able to sustain the impending demographically induced bulge in the cost of extant social insurance programs without either rethinking them or, alternatively, imposing draconian tax increases or sacrificing a multitude of basic public obligations, starting with national defense.¹¹⁶ One-party forays are ill-suited to the challenge of meaningfully addressing social entitlements. In the past dozen years, major presidential initiatives of that sort repeatedly faltered: With no buy-in from the GOP, Clinton's proposed overhaul of the nation's

¹¹⁶ Alice Rivlin and Isabel V. Sawhill, eds., *Restoring Fiscal Sanity: How to Balance the Budget* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

health care system crashed and burned. For want of any Democratic support, Bush's effort to modify the Social Security program fared no better. If these debacles are what members of Congress have in mind when they assert that "now we've got gridlock," they are right.¹¹⁷

Projects like updating Social Security or health insurance—or for that matter reforming farm subsidies, the national tax structure, and most other large, institutionalized claims on the federal fisc—tend to encounter popular skepticism and so require political cover for their proponents. Bipartisan cooperation is essential to face these daunting tasks. Inasmuch as the vendettas of polarized politicians now frustrate even the faintest semblance of bipartisan deal-making, the nation will be the worse off because of them.

When Politics No Longer Stops at the Water's Edge

The same can be said for the thankless job of U.S. international relations. Ostensibly, no great difference on foreign policy sundered the parties in the 2004 campaign. On fighting terrorism, the Democratic platform sounded stout: The government should "take all needed steps."¹¹⁸ On Iraq, the Democratic presidential candidate (in his words) was "not talking about leaving," but "about winning."¹¹⁹ Scratch the surface, however, and a wide breach could be discerned. As we reported

¹¹⁷ Senator James Jeffords quoted in David von Drehle, "Political Split is Pervasive: Clash of Cultures Is Driven by Targeted Appeals and Reinforced by Geography," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2004.

¹¹⁸ Democratic National Committee, *Strong at Home, Respected in the World: The 2004 Democratic National Platform for America*, (Washington, D.C.: DNC, 2004), p. 18.

¹¹⁹ "Transcript: The First Presidential Debate," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2004.

earlier, with respect to how the United States should respond to the security threats posed by rogue states and Islamic extremism, perceptions by the party bases were worlds apart.¹²⁰

The message emanating from leading advocacy groups in Democratic circles has been that military action to oust dangerous despots and regimes that harbor terrorists is counterproductive. Here, according to Peter Beinart of *The New Republic*, was how the premier liberal organization, MoveOn, viewed a U.S. attack on Afghanistan after September 11: “If we retaliate by bombing Kabul and kill people oppressed by the Taliban, we become like the terrorists we oppose.”¹²¹

The Democratic establishment, to be sure, never went that far. In the murkier dilemma, how to handle Saddam Hussein, 29 Democratic senators (and the leading Democratic candidates in the 2004 race) voted with 48 Republicans in October 2002 to authorize the use of force. Yet, the main thing to note about such glimmers of bipartisanship is their inconstancy. Three years later, with the armed forces conducting a high-stakes counterinsurgency in Iraq, Senate Democrats voted overwhelmingly to develop a timetable for withdrawing the troops.¹²² It turns out, in short, that now these members *were* “talking about leaving”—and not necessarily “about winning.”

¹²⁰ In May 2005, the Pew Research Center came to this blunt conclusion: “Foreign affairs assertiveness now almost completely distinguishes Republican-oriented voters from Democratic-oriented voters.... In contrast, attitudes relating to religion and social issues are not nearly as important in determining party affiliation.” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Beyond Red vs. Blue* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2005), pp. 1-2.

¹²¹ Peter Beinart, “A Fighting Faith: An Argument for a New Liberalism,” *The New Republic*, December 13, 2004.

¹²² The vote on this amendment to a 2006 appropriations bill, November 15, 2005, counted 38 Democratic senators, one Republican, and one Independent in favor. Only five Democrats joined the 53 Republicans voting “nay.”

The purpose of these reflections is not to side with one group or another about whether it was wise to invade Iraq or Afghanistan, nor about other fateful policy determinations in the post-9/11 context. Our point is only that stability and perseverance in the pursuit of a foreign policy are as necessary in today's treacherous world as during the showdown with fascism in the 1940s and Communism afterwards. A course of action buffeted by polarized politicians, and tugged in contradictory directions, is no course whatsoever.

Abusing the Judiciary

There is reason to fear that if partisan contestation abandons all restraint, it can wreck more than decorum in the legislative branch; it could weaken other parts of the government—sensitive executive agencies and, above all, the federal bench.¹²³

A polarized Congress and its retinue of strident advocacy groups is bruising the bureaucracy and the courts in a number of ways. The new interpretation of senatorial advice and consent, seemingly held by much of the parliamentary opposition, was recently summed up by minority leader Harry M. Reid (Democrat of Nevada): “The president is not entitled to very much deference in staffing the third branch of government, the judiciary.”¹²⁴ Accordingly, the grueling and often acrimonious process of confirming presidential appointments has increased vacancy rates in several judicial

¹²³ Forrest Malzman, “Advice and Consent: Cooperation and Conflict in the Appointment of Federal Judges,” in Quirk and Binder, *The Legislative Branch*.

¹²⁴ Floor statement, Harry Reid, “Roberts Leaves Too Many Unanswered Questions,” September 20, 2005.

circuits.¹²⁵ Rates of judicial confirmation under George W. Bush have been the slowest of the last four presidents.¹²⁶ Bracing for pitched battles over Supreme Court nominees, the White House repaired to stealth candidates—ones with unknown views or zipped lips.¹²⁷ At least one recent nominee (Harriet Miers) had a paper-trail so wafer-thin, her basic qualifications for the job were a mystery to many.

On top of this deterioration, the nature of rhetorical assaults on the judiciary took in 2005 an inflammatory turn not heard in a long while. A prominent member of the Senate leadership openly described one of the Supreme Court justices as “a disgrace.” At another point, House majority leader Tom Delay (Republican of Texas) threatened unspecified retribution against judges involved in the Terri Schiavo case, and blurted that Justice Anthony Kennedy should be held “accountable” for using international law in deciding a recent death-penalty case.¹²⁸ Utterances like these signaled a degree of partisan distemper increasingly careless about the separation of powers. “Our independent judiciary is the most respected branch of our government, and the envy of the world,” cautions Theodore Olson. It is also a delicate one, not to be trifled with.¹²⁹

More Distrust

¹²⁵ Sarah A. Binder and Forrest Maltzman, “Half-empty or Half-full? Do Vacant Federal Judgeships Matter?” paper prepared for the 2005 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.

¹²⁶ Sarah A. Binder and Forrest Maltzman, “Senatorial Delay in Confirming Federal Judges, 1947-1998,” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 46 no. 1 (January 2002), pp. 190-199. Also, Nolan McCarty and Rose Razaghian, “Advice and Consent: Senate Responses to Executive Branch Nominations 1885-1996,” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 43, no. 4 (October 1999) pp. 1122-1143.

¹²⁷ See Stuart Taylor, Jr., “Opening Argument: Does Miers Have What it Takes to Excel on the Bench?” *National Journal*, October 15, 2005.

¹²⁸ Charles Krauthammer, “Judicial Insanity,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2005.

One way to regard the current state of America’s political parties is that their polarization tends to alienate and exclude ordinary citizens: “The bulk of the American citizenry,” says Fiorina, “is somewhat in the position of the unfortunate citizens of some third-world countries who try to stay out of the crossfire while Maoist guerrillas and right-wing death squads shoot at each other.”¹³⁰ But another way to view the belligerents is that they actually interest and engage *more* voters—including more of the average sort, not just fanatics of the left and right.¹³¹

Inclusion of the fanatics, by the way, is itself a possible net benefit. Better to pitch partisan tents inclusive enough for society’s keenly ideological tribes than to further radicalize them by freezing them out. As Jonathan Rauch, a Brookings guest scholar and correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*, conjectured in a brilliant article last year, “On balance it is probably healthier if religious conservatives are inside the political system than if they operate as insurgents and provocateurs on the outside.” When “the parties engage fierce activists” even at the risk of eclipsing some “tame centrists,” Rauch concludes, “that is probably better for the social peace than the other way around.”¹³²

Even if the polar party system over-represents, more than domesticates, the most fervid activists, it has not bored everybody else. The hotly contested 2004 election produced an impressive turnout, 59 percent—or nearly five percent higher than four years earlier. Fired-up party organizations managed to generate the remarkable increase in participation, often through old-fashioned get-out-the-vote methods (face-to-face contact

¹²⁹ Theodore B. Olson, “Lay Off Our Judiciary,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2005.

¹³⁰ Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, p. 8.

¹³¹ On how issue polarization helped explain the 2004 increase in voter turnout, see Alan Abramowitz and Walter J. Stone, “The Bush Effect: Polarization, Turnout, and Activism in the 2004 Presidential Election,” paper prepared for the 2005 meeting of the American Political Science Association.

between campaign workers and prospective voters) not seen on so large a scale since the heyday of the old party machines.¹³³ Both sides worked feverishly. The Democratic vote increased from 51 million in 2000 to 57 million. The Republican vote surged from 50.5 million to nearly 61 million. Figures of that magnitude suggest that a lot of average voters, not just blowhards at the extremes, were successfully mobilized.¹³⁴

If polarized parties are what can get 120.3 million Americans to cast ballots—the largest number in U.S. history—why worry? Because a healthy civic culture ought to do more than bestir voters; it should build their trust in the nation’s political institutions. It is in this respect that, alas, querulous partisanship can become corrosive. An abundance of nasty campaign advertising, negative news-media slants, and outbursts by truculent politicians does not necessarily discourage people from voting, but a citizenry ingesting so steady a diet of partisan vitriol may nonetheless grow disenchanting and cynical.¹³⁵ The fact that, consequently, bodies such as the U.S. Congress operate under a cloud of public mistrust is far from ideal.¹³⁶

¹³² Jonathan Rauch, “Bipolar Disorder,” *Atlantic Monthly* (January/February 2005), p. 110.

¹³³ Michael P. McDonald, “The Numbers Prove that 2004 May Signal More Voter Interest,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 27, 2004.

¹³⁴ The figures are all the more remarkable considering the massive mobility of the U.S. population. With almost 47 percent of Americans having changed their place of residence over the previous five years, the negative implications for voter registration could have depressed turnout well below the 59 percent level.

¹³⁵ See E.J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (Simon & Schuster, 2004).

¹³⁶ See John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1-3; David C. King, “The Polarization of American Political Parties and Mistrust of Government,” in Joseph S. Nye, Philip Zelikow and David C. King, eds., *Why People Don’t Trust Government* (Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 155-178. In a more recent book, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse link public distrust to the perceived level of political controversy, which they intensely dislike. See *Stealth Democracy: Americans’ Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Conclusions

The politics of the United States today are organized by two parties that exhibit somewhat greater clarity and cohesion than they did through most of the second half of the twentieth century. While the policy distinctions between them at the programmatic level are, in point of fact, often a lot less bright than many onlookers like to proclaim, the distinctions are plain enough where it counts: on particular issues that motivate the opposing sets of active partisans and also bond significant blocs of ordinary voters more faithfully to one side or the other. Not only that, but the two camps are showing signs of territorial differentiation, so that the ideological proclivities in the electorate and the political geography seem increasingly entwined. In these respects, it is correct to say the nation is more polarized than it was in roughly a generation.

To call these conditions a culture war is melodramatic (a point Professor Fiorina will revisit in detail in a subsequent chapter of this volume). A plurality of the electorate continues to be politically moderate and unaligned. Few, if any, states resemble the homogenous polities of years past (the old one-party South, for example). For every defining issue that separates Democrats from Republicans at present, there seem to be almost as many that have long ceased to be sources of discord. And certainly the contemporary “war” between the parties is, by historical standards, a mild one—particularly in comparison with the maelstroms of the nineteenth century. Then, it was not uncommon for the backers of a presidential candidate to publicly accuse a rival of having a bigamist wife, procuring virgins for foreign ambassadors, or committing serial murders (to cite a few examples from the pamphleteers of Andrew Jackson and John

Quincy Adams in the election of 1828).¹³⁷ The tone of the current times can be disagreeable, but frankly, it sounds tame compared to the rants that, say, John Adams's supporters hurled at Thomas Jefferson in 1796; they would "blister the hairs off a dog's back," as Bill Clinton put it. The importance of placing today's partisanship in proper historical context is spelled out later in this book in an essay by David Brady of Stanford University and Hahrie Han of Wellesley College.

Moreover, the amount of mischief actually caused by political polarization in recent years should be kept in perspective. Mainstream voters have not stayed home in disgust in recent elections; on the contrary, they have turned out in greater numbers. True, their preferences have sometimes received short shrift amid the partisan altercations in Washington (there is no other way to describe, for example, the Clinton impeachment rumpus or the Bush administration's stance on stem cell research), but such departures aside, we are not persuaded that the overall supply of public policy in the current climate has been unrelated to popular demand, nor that the supply has been meager.

The reasons we reach this conclusion are quite straightforward. For all the angst about paralytic polarization, the volume of policy items on which the parties have come to considerable consensus over the years is too often underestimated. Bipartisanship is stumbling these days, but occasionally it still happens, and continues to get some significant things done. Polarized though they are, the political parties, just as importantly, remain locked in tight competition. Inevitably, their parity means that presidential candidates on both sides simply cannot be oblivious to voters in the malleable middle all of the time. There is just no other logical way to account for key

¹³⁷ Paul Johnson, "Once Upon a Time," *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 2004.

policy initiatives such as Bush's expensive prescription drug benefit. (Yes, the legislation itself was adopted on "polarized" party-line votes. The original inspiration, though, was a calculated appeal to the electoral center.)

Parity also means that moderates in Congress, though an increasingly endangered species, retain considerable leverage. The arithmetic is elementary: No matter how polar the parties may be, an evenly divided legislature enables even a dwindling band of centrists to hold the balance of power. Clearly, the moderates have kept polarized politics from deadlocking the Senate; their pivotal role, for instance, shelved parliamentary tactics that, in the end, might have brought most legislative business to a standstill.¹³⁸

Even with all these reassurances in mind, however, some implications of partisan polarization are sobering. We fear that the current pattern will delay, perhaps indefinitely, serious work on the fiscally exacting social programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid over the ensuing decades. Discharging that politically perilous responsibility will almost certainly call for a greater measure of bipartisan comity than has been mustered in the past dozen years. We fret, also, that sustaining a steady national security posture and foreign policy may become infeasible when partisan dissension knows no bounds. And we are uneasy with the way Washington's polemicists of both the right and left take liberties with fragile institutions such as the independent judicial branch, and abet a general loss of trust in the nation's public life.

¹³⁸ We refer here, of course, to the "gang of 14's" compromise over the Senate majority's so-called "nuclear option" to bar minority filibusters against Supreme Court nominees. This rule change would have triggered a counter-tactic by the Democratic opposition: shutting down the progress of practically all other Senate business.

It is crucial, therefore, to gain a better understanding of how these problems arose. The rest of this volume offers some leads. E.J. Dionne, Jr., a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, provides a chapter on the increasingly important impact of religious voters and groups. Diana Mutz, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, explores the influence of the news media. Lastly, Thomas E. Mann, another veteran Brookings scholar, takes a look at systemic changes such as the sectional realignment of parties, the effects of partisan parity, the consequences of unified government, abrasive parliamentary tactics, and the implications of gerrymanders, primary challenges, and safe congressional seats.

From these accounts, scholars, policymakers, and interested citizens will learn more about how to locate and assess the system's malfunctions, and hence what remedies might be worth considering.