



DEMOCRACY PAPERS

The Dark and Bright Sides of Party Polarization

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Current developments in US congressional politics show increasing levels of party polarization, culminating in a rhetoric of crisis in academic and public debates about the current state of democracy. Increasing levels of party polarization are said to facilitate distrust of the political system among voters and to contribute to legislative gridlock, thus threatening democratic governance.¹

Acknowledging this anxious analysis, this essay argues that, in principle, party polarization must be viewed as an asset to democracy, since it helps to facilitate accountable government. However, the current *form* of polarization endangers democracy because it includes disagreement about the democratic rules of the game, rather than just divides over policies. What is most worrisome is that such divisions are not only manifest in US politics but are also present in many other established democracies. Disagreements over the legitimacy of democratic norms and institutions are of global significance and thus must be seen as a true challenge for democracy.

Party polarization as a pathway to accountable government

What exactly is party polarization? Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal provide an authoritative answer to this question. They define party polarization as a situation in which political parties are far apart on policy issues, and party members are tightly clustered around the party mean.² Longitudinal analyses on roll call votes in the US Congress show striking

developments toward greater levels of party polarization since the 1970s. Today, the average policy preferences of the Democratic and Republican parties are more divided than at any other time in modern history.³ In an increasing proportion of congressional votes, more than 90 percent of one party votes against 90 percent of the

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other party. Similarly, in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the typical member of Congress voted with his or her party on party-dividing questions just over 60 percent of the time; in the 1980s, over 70 percent of the time; and in the 1990s, over 80 percent of the time. Since 2000, members have voted with their parties more than 87 percent of the time.

The key question about this trend is whether we need to be anxious about it. Does this development pose a threat to democratic governance? In principle, no. While the increasing unity of and distinctiveness between congressional parties is striking, when put in a larger context this hardly appears to be a troublesome development for two main reasons. First, from a cross-national perspective, party polarization in the United States indicates a trend toward normalcy rather than toward a state of crisis. It moves the US party system closer to the group of established and stable European democracies. In these democracies, parties are characterized by high levels of unity in legislative voting, as well as ideological distinctiveness, when mapped on the traditional left-right spectrum. Most European democracies post-World War II consistently match, or even exceed, the levels of party unity in floor voting currently seen in the US Congress.⁴ However, in past decades, this did not threaten democracy. It rather facilitated accountable, responsive, and stable democratic government in European democracies.

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A second reason for optimism comes from a historical perspective on the issue. Current trends toward greater party polarization in congressional politics align with past concerns about the parochial and fragmented nature of the US Congress.⁵ In 1950, the American Political Science Association’s Committee on Political Parties stressed responsible party government as the most desirable instrument of democracy. It argued that voters could exercise greater control over government if the two major political parties were polarized in the sense that they adopt clear and ideologically distinct policy platforms, and if they implement their platforms in legislative decision-making in disciplined ways.⁶ For E. E. Schattschneider, writing in 1942, democracy was almost unthinkable due to the pluralist and diverse nature of modern societies. He considered disciplined parties the only means to effectively connect citizens and the state under these conditions, allowing for accountable democratic government.⁷

Reasons for an optimistic stance on party polarization also stem from the fact that responsible party government not only serves as a means to effectively connect citizens and the state, but also facilitates the consistency and efficiency of policymaking. Therefore, it can counteract the excessive and inefficient spending, known as pork, that the US Congress has been found guilty of in the past.⁸ To sum up, if we put current debates on polarization in the context of past critical analyses of congressional politics, one is led to wonder why remedies promoted in the past are now suddenly seen as a disease.

The worrisome dimension of party polarization

Efforts to identify why current trends are so worrisome have led some observers to stress the *extent* of party polarization as the true reason for concern. Ronald Dworkin warns that the split between the two poles may become an “unbridgeable gulf” if there is no “common ground to be found.”⁹ However, the assumption that

American parties might have grown ideologically too far apart from each other can hardly be securely deduced from the available empirical evidence. Standard measures, such as NOMINATE scores,¹⁰ are not able to truly distinguish between the types of motivations, whether ideological or strategic, that make legislators close party ranks in roll call voting. These measures are also not able to exactly capture ideological distances between legislators and between parties. This results in the conclusion that contemporary parties might be better “sorted” ideologically—with conservatives confined to one party and liberals to the other—but that liberals and conservatives themselves might be no farther apart on substantive policy than in the past.¹¹

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The true reason that party polarization in the United States is worrisome is not the extent of ideological polarization, but rather the particular issues parties are polarized about. Most accounts on polarization, similar to Poole and Rosenthal cited above, assume that polarization concerns divides over policy issues, either economic, cultural, or both. In contrast, recent polarization in the US Congress includes party differences about the rules of the game, or essentially about conceptions of democracy.

The recent behavior of some politicians can serve as a clear example of these worrisome divisions over the rules of the game. The following examples specifically depict visible transgressions of the norms of liberal democracy, such as open disrespect of key institutions. Consider Republican candidate for US Senate Roy Moore, who employed allegations of voter fraud following his defeat to Democrat Doug Jones in order to undermine the special election’s validity. More than two weeks after the December 12, 2017, special election, he not only still failed to concede but also doubled-down on the voter fraud claims (which were widely perceived as questionable and unfounded) by bringing a lawsuit.

Similar tactics were employed by President Donald Trump when he repeatedly claimed that he would have won the popular vote if it weren’t for millions of “illegal votes.” Open disrespect for democracy’s key institutions is not only directed toward the electoral system, but also involves frequent verbal attacks on members of the judiciary, as the judicial system is critically perceived to act as a constraint on the party’s or individual’s political ambitions. For example, in a comment on a recent ruling by a San Francisco judge on “sanctuary cities,” President Trump claimed that “this case is yet one more example of egregious overreach by a single, unelected district judge.”

The subtext of such attacks reveals a fundamental division over conceptions of democracy. Their protagonists are driven by the assumption of a direct bond between themselves and “the people” that they consider the true source of democratic

legitimacy. They invoke what German sociologist Max Weber has called “charismatic legitimacy” to reject the procedural side of modern liberal democracy, in which political power is constrained by internal checks and due process of law, and in which any political choice is seen as the result of compromise and negotiation.

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To be sure, criticism of liberal democracy is not recent. What is new and significant is that individual transgressions of the rules of the game receive widespread support from large numbers of bystanders who play active roles in the political system, and who either openly cheer or silently

support this behavior. What is also new is that these transgressions have come to be structured as party political stances. While supporters of the Republican Party tend to promote this vision of democracy, it is contradicted by their Democratic counterparts who continue to subscribe to the liberal (procedural) creed of democracy. Lastly, what is remarkable and worrisome is the deep antagonism between these two camps, which some scholars have described as “affective polarization” that results in growing incivility and dogmatism in congressional politics¹² and high levels of distrust among partisan camps in the electorate.¹³ In this vein, opposing views are not perceived as a different side in a political debate, but rather as a morally wrong choice.

Polarization across the Atlantic

The argument made here does not consider the substance of current debates to be the only worrisome aspect of polarization for US politics. Contradicting earlier accounts on the desirability of responsible party government in the United States, some authors rightly point out that party polarization necessarily will result in gridlock given how the US system of checks and balances¹⁴ differs from European parliamentary systems. However, what is truly significant about the concerning features of party polarization stressed in this essay is that they are not confined to US politics but are also present in the established democracies of Europe, which have seen the rise of populist parties. According to Zsolt Enyedi, new democracies in Eastern Europe are plagued by populist forms of polarization, which he claims pose a more acute danger to democracy than the much-feared under-institutionalization and fragmented configurations of party politics in these countries.¹⁵ The gravity of the situation results from the fact that populist parties and elites in countries such as Hungary or Poland have come to question the fundamental rules of the game, such as the independence of the judicial system, freedom of the press, and checks and balances as key elements of democracy.

Similar developments can be seen in established Western European democracies where populist parties, of the left and right, promote the need to reclaim power from corrupt and detached elites and to revamp key features of democracy.¹⁶ So far, the difference between European and US developments lies in the pattern that this form of party polarization takes. In Europe, antagonistic debates pitch new populist parties against established mainstream parties. In the United States, one of the two established parties has been significantly affected by populist trends and now functions as an anti-establishment voice in this debate. However, the deeper

significance of this global trend manifests in how some European populist parties, such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) or the Danish People's Party (DF), have emerged as consolidated and stable parties that have already won access to government. This suggests that polarization over the rules of the game is gaining ground and will certainly affect the future of democratic governance, which is at a crucial juncture today on both sides of the Atlantic.

democratic ideals

fringe politics

participation

polarization

populism



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