Solutions to Political Polarization in America

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American Political Parties

Exceptional No More

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To understand polarization we must understand political parties. Polarization is often considered abnormal and even pathological. Yet this assumption is questionable. Polarization is typically defined as growing cohesion in the policy stands of parties’ officials, activists, and voters and divergence in parties’ policies ( Fiorina and Abrams 2008). A comparative and historical perspective reveals that cohesive parties with divergent policy positions are common in stable democracies. Parties draw support from different societal interests, taking on divergent policy positions as a result (Karol 2009). Party competition also generates “teammanship” (Lee 2009), as politicians seek to discredit the other side while claiming credit for themselves. As a result, clear divisions between parties are the norm.

In countries other than the United States, however, strong parties do not produce the dysfunction visible in Washington. The problem is the mismatch between polarized parties and the U.S. Constitution’s separation of powers. This tension was obscured for decades when parties were atypically divided and, earlier still, when the American state did little. The parties’ increasing cohesion was unplanned, as was their mid-twentieth-century eclipse. Polarization may abate again, but there is little reason to believe such a development is imminent or that tinkering with redistricting, primaries, and campaign finance law will hasten it. Recognition of polarization’s durability could eventually produce openness to reforms that are now beyond reach, such as a move toward a parliamentary system. In the medium term, however, abolishing the filibuster is a more realistic goal.

AMERICAN PARTIES: PAST AND PRESENT

Traditionally, political scientists have seen American parties as pragmatic and election oriented. For some leading party scholars, parties and interest groups were competing forms of political organization. E. E. Schattschneider saw the American political system plagued by “pressure groups” that he thought disproportionately represented the wealthy. For him strong parties were the solution. In Party Government (1952, 1954) Schattschneider asserted that “if the parties exercised the power to govern effectively, they would shut out the pressure groups.”

The famous 1959 American Political Science Association report, “Toward a More Responsible Two Party System,” produced by a team led by Schattschneider, also reflected this view.

Schattschneider’s 1960s later conceded that lobbies were often aligned with parties. However, he still insisted that lobbies’ influence within parties was limited, because individual groups typically made a modest contribution to a party’s total vote. Even specifying the percentage of a party’s vote accounted for by members of a pressure group overstated its importance in his view, because many of the group’s members would have voted for a party even without the lobby endorsing it.

Schattschneider’s distinction between interest groups and parties was long accepted; for example, Schlozman and Tierney (1986, 201) state that “party and organized interest strength are proportional where parties are strong, organized interests are weak and vice-versa.” A more recent authoritative study (Aldrich 1995) also sees “parties in service” to elected officials and candidates.

A different perspective emerges in what has been termed the “UCLA School” of party scholarship. In these studies (Cohen et al. 2008; Karol 2009; Maskel 2009; Bawn et al. 2012) parties are seen not chiefly as formal structures dominated by office seekers, but as coalitions of “policy demanders.” These groups dominate the nomination process, ensuring the choice of candidates more faithful to them than the notional median voter. However, politicians still play an important role as coalition managers (Karol 2009) who encourage the movement of groups into the party by taking new stands on issues and who play a coordinating role, balancing the concerns of disparate elements of the party.

Yet the key aspect of a party for those seeking to understand governance is the coalition and not the candidates it supports. The stakes in this debate are not merely academic. Models of parties as politician dominated can still allow for divergence from the median voter by incorporating the value of a “party brand” for candidates. Yet group-centered parties that care about policy will diverge more from each other and from the wishes of the public than candidate-centered ones. Parties will support extreme policies in order to please constituent groups to the extent that they can exploit the “blind spot” (Bawn et al. 2012) of voter ignorance.
In reality, the relationship between groups and parties has varied. The low-polarization period in American political history (roughly the late 1930s through the mid-1970s) was anomalous and marked by large regional variation in party coalitions. It stemmed chiefly from the dominance of Democrats in the South, itself a result of the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the former Confederate states. Southern Democratic politicians long represented a very different constituency from that of their Northern co-partisans, especially after the New Deal brought labor union members and African Americans into the party outside the South. Ideological pluralism within the Republican Party, although less marked, was also significant in this period. Into the late twentieth century, split-ticket voting was common. Many members of Congress represented states or districts that voted for presidents from the other party (Jacobson 2013). The presence of these “cross-pressured” legislators often allowed chief executives to find allies across party lines.

The heterogeneity of the two parties had important consequences for governance. Often the working majority in Congress was a bipartisan “conservative coalition” comprising most Republicans and Southern Democrats. Congresses “controlled” by Democrats could seldom enact the Democratic platform. Shifts in party control on Capitol Hill, uncommon after the New Deal, did not typically have a large impact on policy. Likewise, whether control of Congress and the presidency was unified in the hands of one party or divided between Democrats and Republicans did not have enormous policy consequences during this low-polarization era (Mayhew 1991).

This period, so different from the patterns in other countries as well from other eras in U.S. history, was also the time when the American state greatly expanded at home and abroad. A vast peacetime military with bases dotted around the globe was created for the first time in the postwar years. Federal revenues grew enormously, and a welfare state of sorts was established from the 1930s through the 1960s. Regulation of industry increased. Earlier state growth in the Progressive Era (Skowronek 1982) also occurred at a time when traditional patronage-based party organizations had begun to decline, even if voting in Congress was still relatively polarized.

The parties’ limited cohesion during the period when the state grew mitigated the tensions between the logic of partisanship and American political institutions. Epstein (1986) described “parties in the American mold” as only moderately cohesive, just strong enough to lend some coherence to elections and build linkages among elected officials without overpowered the political structure. Although many contemporary observers, including political scientists, deplored such weak parties, Epstein found them appropriate for our political institutions. Yet if so, this was merely a happy accident and not something inherent in the Democrats and Republicans.

In the decades before the depolarized mid-twentieth century the American political system saw polarized parties more similar to those active today. How did it cope? Some say that these parties had few policy differences. Yet that view is overstated (Gerring 1998). Another answer is that the filibuster, implied by any cloture procedure until 1976, was seen as an extreme tactic and used sparingly. Controversial major legislation passed the Senate by narrow margins (Wawro and Schickler 2006). Yet there were other forms of parliamentary obstruction including the “disappearing quorum” in the House of Representatives during much of this period.

The short answer is that the consequences of extreme partisanship were less severe in the late nineteenth century than they are now because the state took a much less active role in society in the earlier period. The federal government could have shut down for quite a while before anyone noticed. Republican strife is more damaging under our current political arrangements precisely because the government is far more pervasive than it was during the nineteenth century.

In any case, the unpolarized parties some remember fondly are history. Southern Democratic legislators’ constituencies became more similar to those of their Northern co-partisans following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, narrowing the gap between the preferences of the two groups of Democrats on Capitol Hill. Eventually the number of Southern Democrats in Congress greatly declined as well. Although the realignment of the South is the most dramatic change, other developments have combined to produce the parties we now see. Since the 1970s new constituencies have been drawn into parties (Karol 2009, 2012): gun rights supporters and religious conservatives in the GOP, feminists and LGBT rights advocates in the Democratic Party. Anti-tax activists have become organized in the GOP in the form of the Club for Growth and Americans for Tax Reform. These groups join the traditional party constituencies just as labor unions joined the Democratic Party. Collectively these groups fuel polarization. Ambitious politicians are compelled to be responsive to such groups or risk their renominations. Few members of Congress now are elected from districts or states that supported the other party’s presidential candidate (Jacobson 2013), so fewer face depolarizing cross-pressures.

1 An exception to this rule was the enactment of the Taft-Hartley labor law in the Republican-controlled 80th Congress. Yet even that measure passed with substantial Democratic support.

2 The Post Office was perhaps the one part of the nineteenth-century government that was visible to people.
PARTIES AND THE MADISONIAN SYSTEM

The Founders famously did not seek or anticipate political parties. Their frequent use of the term “faction” denoted both parties and interest groups as we now understand them. James Madison was mistaken about some important things, at least in his incarnation as the Publius of Federalist 50 and Federalist 51. Separation of powers is undermined — ambition does not reliably check ambition — when elected officials see themselves as partisans first and tenants of the Congress or the presidency second. The extent to which the legislative branch investigates the executive branch now depends on whether one party controls both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. This dynamic was unanticipated by the Madison and other framers.

An “extended republic” in which no single church or economic interest would comprise a majority was Madison’s second solution to factional tyranny. Yet an extended republic — even one far more extensive and diverse than Madison imagined — has proved no bar to factional influence, because factions do not need to be majorities to affect policy. By entering coalitions with other intense policy demanders that care about different policy areas, interest groups can gain much influence through the institutionalized logroll that is party politics.

Yet if U.S. political institutions do not impede the formation of parties, they do combine with them to frustrate policy making. No other advanced industrialized country has so many institutional veto points: a powerful presidency and two chambers of a legislature with nearly equal powers elected in very different ways, and a Supreme Court armed with the power of judicial review. Moreover, Senate rules, although not in the Constitution, are difficult to change and ensure that a sizable minority party in that chamber can also block most legislation.

This multiplicity of veto points in the American political system typically ensures that each party can thwart action if it sticks together. Since 1980 one party has controlled all of these veto points (not including the Supreme Court) for only a portion of a single Congress. As Dahl (2003) observes, this political system has always been exceptional among stable democracies. We used to have exceptional parties to go with it. They did not stick together consistently. Now our parties resemble those in parliamentary democracies, but our political system still does not. So instead of responsible party government, in which one party (or a party coalition in multiparty systems) can be judged by voters on conditions since the previous election, we get gridlock and finger pointing.

The ubiquity of polarized parties abroad suggests that it is our unusual political institutions that require reform, rather than our party system. Yet many resist this diagnosis. Our constitutional scheme has lasted more than two centuries and the filibuster is almost as old, whereas within living memory American parties have been weak. Understandably, many assume that the more recent condition should be easier to remedy. For older observers, bipartisan cooperation is still an expectation. Deviations from it are seen as pathologies to be treated. There is a great temptation to blame gridlock on a lack of leadership or to believe that tweaking election laws will be effective. The strategies of many older foundations, think tanks, and media outlets presuppose elected officials free to build bipartisan coalitions and voters prepared to listen to voices from outside their partisan tribe.

There is no reason to expect polarization to decline anytime soon, however. The trends in American political parties, toward division and incoherence from the 1930s through the 1970s, and toward polarization more recently, were largely unplanned. The issue agenda of national politics and the changing composition of party coalitions rather than electoral or procedural reforms have been the key drivers. Cross-cutting issues could again arise, but none appear imminent. So the clash between American political institutions and parties needs to be addressed.

COPING STRATEGIES

If Madison overestimated (or perhaps oversold) the constitutional order’s ability to tame factions, he was right that the causes of faction are ineradicable in a free society. The challenge is how to cope with them. In the decade since polarization has become a major concern among political observers, many “solutions” have been proposed. Some of these reforms (e.g., independent redistricting commissions or open primaries) may have their own merits. I think the normative case is much stronger for the former, but studies indicate that we should not expect either redistricting reforms (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2009) or opening primaries (McGhee et al. 2014) to have much impact on polarization. The case for these reforms, such as it is, lies elsewhere.

More radical reforms such as the imposition of nonpartisan ballots — which are common at the municipal level and are used in some county and state elections — might make more of a difference. Some polling suggests this proposal would be popular (Wright 2008). Yet not only would it be resisted but if implemented it would also come at a great cost: turnout is lower in nonpartisan elections (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Troutwine 2013). This effect may be greatest among voters of lower socioeconomic status, for whom the informative value of the party cue is greatest (Wright 2008). In
an era of rising inequality nonpartisan ballots might demobilize low-income voters.

Moreover, any measure that would reduce voters’ information about candidates should be approached with caution. Absent the party cue, voters are likely to fall back on other cues, including incumbency (Trounstine 2013) and candidate ethnicity and gender (Matsen and Fine 2006). The importance of campaign contributions would grow. Groups would still organize to influence elections and shape policy, but they would be even less accountable, as demonstrated by both existing nonpartisan elections and the initiative process, filled with shadowy groups that have misleading names financing campaigns.

Once it is accepted that parties will not and should not be reformed away and that polarization is normal and natural, prospects for institutional reform may improve. Even moves toward a parliamentary system may begin to seem less fanciful. This prospect remains remote, of course. Reformers have long recognized the difficulty of even broaching this topic. Even the authors of the 1950 American Political Science Association report “Toward a More Responsible Party System,” who gazed longingly across the Atlantic at Westminster, did not advocate a parliamentary system. Instead they made do with a recommendation for four-year terms for U.S. Representatives, elected at the same time as the president, in hopes of reducing the incidence of divided government. Yet discussion of constitutional reform is a prerequisite to change, and educating Americans about the unnatural nature of our system and its attendant dysfunctions is a worthwhile activity for scholars and public-minded foundations.

Even in the medium term, the Constitution will not change, and polarization will not abate. These sobering realities make developing coping strategies more urgent. One promising candidate is filibuster reform. Ideally, the filibuster would be abolished, but senators have been reluctant to go so far. In November 2013, however, Democratic senators changed the rules to allow a simple majority to reach cloture on executive branch and judicial nominations except for the Supreme Court. Under divided government, which is likely to persist at least until the end of the Obama administration, abolishing the filibuster on legislation is less urgent, because the partisan divide is the main impediment to legislation. Yet the move to majority cloture on most nominations breaks a taboo and makes eventual abolition of the filibuster seem more plausible.

Some reforms short of abolition have been suggested. Requiring obstructionists to speak on the floor, the so-called talking filibuster, would achieve little. Forty-one or more Senators using the filibuster as a partisan tactic could easily take turns holding the floor. A return to single-tracking of the Senate agenda, customary before the mid-1970s, would make obstruction more costly by blocking all other legislation when a minority is filibustering a bill. Yet this cost would be borne by both parties, not just the obstructionists.

A more promising rule change would allow one senator seeking action to call for a vote and require the 41 or more obstructionists to vote against this action. This would greatly increase the costs of obstruction for the minority without hurting those in the majority.

Another tactic that might facilitate a move toward majoritarianism in the Senate is to abolish the filibuster, but to delay this change for four to six years. This delay could advance the cause of reform in two ways. First, it could reduce costs and concerns about partisan advantage. At any given time a minority might avoid losing the power to block legislation. Often there is agreement about which party is likely to be in the majority after the next election as well. However, there is more uncertainty as to which party will enjoy majority status four or six years hence. Second, it is often older, more senior senators who are most attached to the current rules. A change scheduled to occur some years in the future might seem less threatening to such legislators. The reform might also be more palatable to minorities by adding a provision allowing them to offer at least a couple of amendments on bills.

Unlike the redistricting or primary reforms often advocated, abolishing the filibuster would have an important impact on policy making. In contrast to moving the United States toward a parliamentary system, filibuster abolition would not require constitutional amendments. Nor is it a doomed effort to block factions from forming or a heavy-handed attempt to keep senators from using party as a cue to navigate the political world. It may not be easy, but it is imaginable in the medium term, especially after the reform voted in November 2013.

It is important to recognize that allowing the Senate to function via majority rule would probably increase party-line voting. Sixty-two-majorities would no longer have to be cobbled together routinely. Since winning votes from the other side often requires watering down legislation or, historically, wooing senators with “side payments,” bills would probably pass by narrower margins along party lines in a post-filibuster Senate. In that sense abolition or weakening of the filibuster could be seen to increase polarization.

Yet bipartisanship should not be an end in itself. Filibuster abolition would not make separation of powers and polarized parties fully compatible, but it would allow a cohesive party to govern when it controlled both Capitol Hill and the White House. The recent reform has reduced the delays in the present confirmation process and the resulting vacancies in the executive
and judicial branches. While seen as revolutionary by senators who jealously guard their personal prerogatives, this change, and even the total abolition of the filibuster is really a modest reform from the standpoint of the system as a whole. The United States would still retain more veto points than other advanced democratic countries.

CONCLUSION

Political parties exist in all stable democracies. They commonly work as teams, stake out distinct policy positions, and seek to discredit their rivals for control of political institutions. Today’s Democrats and Republicans are not exceptional in this respect. However, U.S. political institutions, established at a time when parties did not exist and were not sought, do not work well with cohesive parties. This conflict was long obscured by the anomalous weakness of our parties and, earlier still, by the very limited activity of the national government.

These conditions no longer obtain and are unlikely to return, so we are faced with a chronic problem. Discussion about constitutional reform should be advanced, even though this is not a realistic prospect in the short or medium term. A more attainable goal, itself not achievable without struggle, is filibuster abolition. Other coping strategies may also be possible, but the first step is a more clear-eyed understanding of the situation. Polarization is “the new normal.” Recognition of this fact may advance efforts to cope effectively with it.

References


