

After the “Master Theory”: Downs, Schattschneider, and the Rebirth of Policy-Focused Analysis

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Drawing on the pioneering work of Anthony Downs, political scientists have tended to characterize American politics as a game among undifferentiated competitors, played out largely through elections, with outcomes reflecting how formal rules translate election results into legislative votes. In this perspective, voters, campaigns, elections, and the ideological distribution of legislators merit extensive scrutiny. Other features of the political environment—most notably, the policies these legislators help create and the interest groups that struggle over these policies—are deemed largely peripheral. However, contemporary politics often looks very different than the world described by Downs. Instead, it more closely resembles the world depicted by E. E. Schattschneider—a world in which policy and groups loom large, the influence of voters is highly conditional, and the key struggle is not over gaining office but over reshaping governance. Over the last twenty years, a growing body of scholarship has emerged that advances this corrective vision—an approach we call “policy-focused political science.” In this framework, politics is centrally about the exercise of government authority for particular substantive purposes. Such exercises of authority create the “terrain” for political struggle, profoundly shaping both individual and group political behavior. More important, because policies can be so consequential, they also serve as the “prize” for many of the most enduring political players, especially organized interest groups. The payoffs of a policy-focused perspective include a more accurate portrayal of the institutional environment of modern politics, an appreciation for the fundamental importance of organized groups, a better understanding of the dynamics of policy change, and a more accurate mapping of interests, strategies, and influence. These benefits are illustrated through brief examinations of two of the biggest changes in American politics over the last generation: asymmetric partisan polarization and the growing concentration of income at the top.

The “Downsian” era of American political science is waning. For nearly two generations, the model of electoral competition and ideological positioning advanced in 1957 by the economist Anthony Downs “served as a kind of ‘master theory,’” in the words of Morris Fiorina.¹ The Downsian approach dominated Fiorina’s subfield of American politics, and it had outsized influence in much of comparative politics and political

economy as well. Downs’s most famous prediction, of course, was that politicians in a two-party system would converge on the position of the voter at the midpoint of the electorate’s ideological distribution, the so-called “median voter theorem.” Yet more than any particular claim, Downs provided a basic conceptual approach to American politics that would influence almost half a century of leading political scientists. According to *The Encyclopedia*

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of *Public Choice*, Downs’s framework functioned “as an analytical point of departure for more elaborate models of policy formation within democracies in much the same way that the competitive model serves the micro economics literature.”² Downs-inspired scholars spanned the spectrum from enthusiastic backers of the median voter theorem to appreciative skeptics. But whether they termed themselves “spatial theorists,” “neo-Downsians,” or simply “Americanists,” they were united in viewing politics through the theoretical map that Downs had drawn.³

In the Downsian map, voters and politicians occupied the foreground, interacting in an environment defined by a set of electoral and legislative rules. As Downs described the lay of the land, officeholders “plan their actions to please voters,” voters in turn “decide how to vote on the basis of government actions,” and the result is “a circular relation of mutual interdependence” in which politicians are generally quite responsive to voters.⁴ Thus, the Downsian perspective focused attention on vote choice, campaigns, and elections. Other features of the political landscape receded into the background. Once at the core of political science, interest groups migrated to the periphery. Even farther off was public policy—a residual of Downsian dynamics that was largely ignored. In the map provided by Downs, the path to insight ran through what David Mayhew would later term “the electoral connection.”⁵

Downs’s framework swept the field because it had—and has—some very attractive features. It is parsimonious, producing broad explanatory reach from a very limited number of moving parts. It is coherent: spatial competition in the electoral arena (when combined with the particular structure of electoral and legislative rules) produces spatial location in the lawmaking arena. For many, it is also normatively appealing, suggesting a close alignment between voter preferences and the actions of public officials. Moreover, Downs’s emphasis on the relationship between voters and their representatives conveniently aligns data and theory, directing the energies of researchers to the most data-rich aspects of political life: mass political behavior and legislative politics. Downs’s approach fed, and in turn fed upon, the growing focus of political scientists on those parts of the political world where large amounts of data could easily be amassed.

But if the gains of the Downsian turn have been substantial, so too have been the costs. All analytic approaches highlight some aspects of the political world at the expense of others. The question is whether these inevitable simplifications retain the most fundamental features of political life. Increasingly, the Downsian perspective fails this test. Contemporary American politics often looks less like the political world described by Downs than the one described by the late political scientist E. E. Schattschneider—a world in which policy and organized groups loom large, the role of elections and voters is highly conditional, and the key

struggle is not over gaining office but over reshaping governance in enduring ways.

In this article, we contrast the Downsian perspective with an alternative approach that has emerged as a major potential corrective, an approach that might be called “Schattschneiderian” because most of its major themes can be found (at least in nascent form) in Schattschneider’s work. That label is ungainly, however, and so we use the more descriptive “policy-focused political science,” to indicate a theoretical as well as an empirical emphasis on the causes and consequences of government activity.

In the policy-focused approach, pride of place is given not to elections but to policies—to the exercise of government authority for particular purposes. In place of the “electoral connection,” the policy-focused perspective stresses the *policy connection* that promotes and sustains coalitions of (partisan) politicians and organized interests. In perhaps the most famous sentence he ever wrote, Downs asserted that politicians “formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections to formulate policies.”⁶ Drawing on a growing body of scholarship, we insist to the contrary that powerful actors often seek to win elections (and do many other things) to formulate policies.

Rather than a parsimonious master theory, policy-focused political science is best thought of as a series of linked themes united by shared conceptual commitments. Indeed, the main strength of the approach is certainly not its parsimony. It is its substantive bite. Policy-focused political science draws attention to extremely important aspects of American politics that are discounted or ignored in the Downsian framework. In doing so, it has the capacity to illuminate and explain critical political developments that those working within the Downsian paradigm have treated as inexplicable or anomalous, or tackled only through jerry-rigged workarounds designed to align the Downsian approach more closely with reality.

Our presentation of policy-focused political science is divided into two parts, reflecting two of its core themes. The first—“policy as terrain”—emphasizes how extensive public policies have themselves become a core feature of the American political system, fundamentally reshaping political contestation. The notion that “policies make politics”—first introduced by Schattschneider in his 1935 *Politics, Pressures, and the Tariff*—has gained currency within political science thanks to a wave of high-profile research on the impact of policies on individual political behavior.⁷ Yet policy-focused scholars have also made tremendous progress in explaining how policies shape interest-group organization and activity, the process of policy change, and the macro-context of American politics.

The breadth and depth of these effects point to the second major theme of the policy-focused perspective, which we call “policy as prize.” Precisely because policies can have substantial and long-lived consequences, a wide range of important political activity is directed toward

influencing the exercise of public authority. The goal is not short-term shifts in advantage, but durable victories won through the reconfiguration of governance. For this reason, the “long game” of politics features a distinctive set of players, strategies, and dynamics. In particular, it advantages actors with extended time horizons, high levels of information, and substantial organizational capacities—characteristics associated with organized interests rather than ordinary voters. For these players, policy is the main prize.

In the final section, we briefly apply these insights to two important topics: asymmetric partisan polarization in which one party (the GOP) has moved farther toward the extremes than the other and the growing concentration of income at the top of the economic ladder. These are among the most critical developments in American politics over the past forty years. They have also proved difficult for Downsian analysis. Indeed, after mostly futile efforts to salvage Downsian accounts, those who have sought to explicate these remarkable shifts have gravitated toward a more policy-centered framework—that is, away from Downs and toward Schattschneider.

Policy as Terrain

The policy-focused approach starts where the Downsian approach trails off—with the exercise of public authority to achieve substantive ends. In the Downsian framework, as Joe Soss and Suzanne Mettler argue, policy only enters the story at the conclusion, if it enters at all.⁸ This is why even analyses that purport to be about lawmaking typically stop at the moment that roll-call votes are cast. Yet in many cases, policy is just the *beginning* of the story. Extensive systems of public policy constitute a core part of the institutional environment of modern politics. As Schattschneider put it almost eighty years ago, “New policies create a new politics.”⁹

The relevance of Schattschneider’s 1935 observation has only grown with the massive expansion of the activist state since then. As Theda Skocpol and her collaborators in the 1980s first powerfully demonstrated, the character of public policies shapes a wide range of political forces, from the organization and mobilization of groups to the formation of political identities to the strategies of political actors.¹⁰ Building on this core insight, political scientists who have sustained an interest in policy have taken institutionalism in a distinctive direction, one increasingly cognizant of the need to see policy choices as highly consequential for political life.¹¹ In the next few sections, we present the most notable and distinctive of these advances, showing how scholars have used policy-focused analysis to explain mass political behavior, the activities and influence of interest groups, the possibilities for policy change in a gridlocked political system, and the broad effects of the activist state on American politics.

For political scientists, the profound role of policy in constituting a polity’s institutional terrain has two major

implications. First, it suggests that we need to explore these effects if we are to explain who participates in politics, how, and with what impact. Second, and even more fundamental, it strengthens the rationale for focusing on how political actors seek to gain control over the “prize” of policy—the major theme we develop later in this article. Once we recognize the potential effects of policy structures, it becomes clear why they are so fiercely contested and how they expand the dimensions of political conflict beyond the electoral arena.

Policy Structures and Individual Behavior

The most visible output of the growing research program on policy as terrain is a set of prominent and persuasive studies of the effects of public policies on individual political attitudes and behavior. Soss’s investigation of the effects of welfare programs on the political participation of the poor, Andrea Campbell’s study of Social Security and the mobilization of the elderly, and Mettler’s analysis of the consequences of the GI Bill of Rights for veterans’ civic engagement—all offer strong evidence linking policy structures to changes in political behavior.¹² Exciting work in this vein continues, as scholars extend into new policy areas, such as the impact of individual interaction with the “carceral state” and the distinctive behavioral effects of tax subsidies and other low-visibility forms of state activism.¹³

We pass quickly over this scholarship precisely because it already constitutes a convincing and well-regarded domain of research. Indeed, it is notable, though not surprising, that the most widely-accepted research agenda in policy-centered analysis is precisely the one that shares the Downsian focus on micro-political behavior. At first glance, one might see this research as merely an incremental extension of the basic Downsian framework. Yet, on deeper reflection, it has much more expansive possibilities. By forcefully demonstrating that extensive policy structures can have a pronounced impact on an important set of political outcomes, these findings increase the plausibility of other effects. Nowhere are these opportunities more evident than when it comes to the effects of policies on organized interest groups.

Policy Structures and Organized Interests

Policies provide a foundation not only for individual political behavior but also for patterns of collective action. Indeed, this was central to Schattschneider’s original “policy creates politics” formulation. In the title of Schattschneider’s 1935 book, *Politics, Pressures, and the Tariff*, “pressures” meant group mobilization, and Schattschneider stressed that policy deeply shaped these pressures:

Indeed, the history of the tariff indicates that governments can and do create and extinguish pressures. By means of the protective system governments stimulate the growth of industries dependent on this legislation for their existence, and these

industries form the fighting legions behind the policy. The tariff likewise destroys interests. The losers adapt themselves to the new conditions imposed upon them, find themselves without the means to continue the struggle, or become discouraged and go out of business. Is this not true, in varying degrees, of nearly all other policies also? New policies create a new politics.¹⁴

Over the past two decades, policy-focused research has greatly extended the theoretical and empirical basis for Schattschneider’s claim. Since the seminal work of Mancur Olson, social scientists have stressed the formidable barriers to collective action.¹⁵ Structures of public policy can either heighten or diminish those barriers. They can be especially important in addressing the high start-up costs and coordination and free-rider problems that make collective action difficult to initiate.¹⁶ Public policies can confer substantial resources on specific types of groups, offering direct and indirect financial subsidies as well as organizational infrastructure and crucial information on which private actors can rely in their efforts to generate sustained collective action.¹⁷

Recent studies have demonstrated the significance of these effects across a substantial range of issues and policies. Working independently, Theda Skocpol and Frank Baumgartner (along with their collaborators) have shown that accounts attributing the major expansion of federal policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s to the mobilization of new groups has the story at least partly backwards.¹⁸ True, groups often pushed effectively to achieve their policy goals. In many cases, however, the policies came first and fueled the expansion of organized citizen activism. They did so by providing resources that helped groups to organize, by creating greater incentives for groups to do so, and by creating focal points for organized activity.

Similarly, Terry Moe’s study of teachers unions shows that unions did not emerge naturally and automatically from some set of diffuse programmatic demands that fueled organizing.¹⁹ Instead, these unions expanded rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s after Democrats in various states (partly pressured by existing unions in other jurisdictions) changed collective bargaining laws in order to facilitate organizing efforts. Of course, it is precisely the desire to reverse these developments that has motivated well-organized conservatives in Wisconsin, Ohio, and elsewhere to follow up electoral victories (in campaigns where labor relations had been at most a marginal issue) with major reforms of collective bargaining rules.

The impact of policy on group activity clearly extends beyond the direct provision of resources to support group formation. As Beth Leech and her colleagues have argued, “Government activity acts as a magnet, pulling groups of all kinds to become active.”²⁰ Some of the most important processes involve counter-mobilization or backlash—what Alan Jacobs and Kent Weaver call “self-undermining feedback.”²¹ New government policies may be seen as a threat, for example, leading groups opposed to these

exercises of public authority to mobilize more energetically. This was the main dynamic producing a vast expansion in the political activities of the business community in the wake of increased regulation of corporate America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Similarly, new policy threats were the main catalyst of the increasing political activity of a number of post-1960s social movements, including the Christian conservative movement—alongside business mobilization, one of the most important developments in recent American politics.²²

Eric Patashnik’s work on the sustainability of policy reforms convincingly demonstrates both the mobilizing and demobilizing impact of policy structures. Patashnik asks: What makes policy reforms supported by diffuse interests durable? His answer: Sustainability depends in large part on the extent to which the new policies “upset inherited coalitional patterns and stimulate the emergence of new vested interests and political alliances.”²³ In short, policy designs are key to long-term changes in coalitions. To take one of his prominent examples, airline deregulation effectively undercut both the institutional support (traditional regulators) and the market position of the least competitive airlines. Here Patashnik’s analysis echoes Schattschneider’s account of tariff reforms a half century earlier: High-cost airlines quickly ceased to be political players not because they changed their position but because they were no longer in business. In other policy areas that Patashnik examines, however, old patterns of group formation were not disrupted and new ones did not take their place. Such was the case with the rationalizing changes introduced by the Tax Reform Act of 1986, which soon crumbled under the renewed pressure of lobbies that had momentarily lost but quickly regained their footing.

Whether counter-mobilization is successful, in short, depends heavily on how policy structures affect the prospects for group mobilization. Over an extended period, the incentives these structures unleash can powerfully alter the composition of organized interests. To employ an ecological metaphor, policy regimes create political “ecosystems” that allow some actors and activities to flourish while others wither. In the long run, therefore, policies are not simply outputs of a given polity. They can have a strong influence on the composition of the polity itself. And like formal political institutions, these policy effects can be rigorously studied and systematically incorporated into theories of collective political behavior.

One final line of argumentation about policies and groups deserves emphasis: the impact of policy on group preferences. Policies induce substantial investments, both tangible and intangible.²⁴ To the extent that these investments are specific to a particular policy arrangement, they may greatly alter the future preferences of social actors with respect to a range of political issues. Political orientations are not simply “out there” in society; they are shaped in significant part through exercises of public authority.

The evolving social policy preferences of employers are particularly telling.²⁵ In the United States at mid-twentieth century, the same employers developed dramatically different viewpoints on the desirability of social insurance in health care (vehemently opposed) and retirement (largely supportive). It is hard to see how these differences could reflect some intrinsic preference for a particular role of government. Instead, early divergences in policy structures—the growth of private health benefits as the core source of protection for working-age Americans, the contrasting development of a universal retirement program on which private retirement plans could build—altered the developing stances of employers. This was not just because established policies changed what employers thought they could get. More fundamentally, these structures gradually changed what employers perceived as desirable in the first place.

Scholars have assembled convincing evidence that the institutional terrain established by significant public policies has a powerful impact on structures of political organization. Who organizes, how they organize, and who they align with and for what purposes cannot simply be read off the distribution of preferences and formal rules of political contestation. The failure of the Downsian perspective to incorporate this critical institutional factor thus represents a major oversight.

Policy Drift and the Gridlock Interval

The ways in which policies shape the “terrain” of political conflict are not just limited to effects on voters or groups. Policies also shape outcomes more directly, by determining the character of the legislative status quo. Research inspired by the Downsian framework has stressed how non-majoritarian institutions (such as the Senate filibuster and presidential veto) can create a “gridlock interval” that locks in the status quo absent substantial shifts in the distribution of preferences within a legislature.²⁶ In the standard spatial model, the size and nature of the gridlock interval depends on how the system of rules interacts with the distribution of preferences. Formal institutions—the rules governing the enactment of legislation—determine the location of the “pivot.” The preferences of the pivotal lawmaker dictate policy. From here, it is a short distance to the argument that elections that shake up the distribution of lawmakers’ preferences are the primary source of policy change.

These models, however, exclude attention to the character of the policy at stake. It is generally assumed that in the absence of legislated change, the policy (that is, the status quo) is stable. Yet recent research shows that the effect of authoritative decision-making processes depends crucially on the particular structure of existing policies. When the effects of policies can vary dramatically depending on changes in the surrounding social context, decision-making procedures that make authoritative

change difficult (for example, supermajority requirements) may not prevent fundamental shifts in policy outcomes. Indeed, institutions promoting gridlock may *facilitate* dramatic changes in programs that are susceptible to the “policy drift” that occurs when stable policy rules interact with an unstable world.²⁷

Here, policy-centered analysis offers another important corrective.²⁸ Because of shifts in social context, profound drift in the true character of policy arrangements may occur in the absence of legislative action. A simple example is the minimum wage, which erodes in real value as consumer prices rise. Struggles over updating the federal minimum—which has declined over the last forty years, despite periodic increases—greatly advantage opponents of a higher wage, who need only to block adjustments or attempts to index the minimum to consumer prices. More generally, changes in the contours of the economy, evolving demographics, and transformations in the behavior of individuals and organizations may substantially alter the functioning of policy arrangements even in the absence of new legislation.²⁹ The process of financial deregulation that proved so fateful for the American economy, for instance, was in significant part a case of policy drift. Old regulations became obsolete as financial markets changed rapidly.

In the context of highly dynamic economies and highly polarized democracies, drift has pervasive and profound effects.³⁰ Moreover, these effects are neither random nor idiosyncratic—we can study them by examining central characteristics both of a policy’s environment and of a policy itself (for example, whether it delegates authority or has provisions for automatically updating). In short, understanding what the “rules” of lawmaking are requires more than just a grasp of legislative procedure. It requires a sophisticated understanding of policy.

Drift, in turn, fundamentally alters the contours of political contestation. In politics, we often want to know who is playing “offense” and who is playing “defense.” Without considering the possibility of policy drift, we can’t know the answer. When drift advantages one set of political actors, they move from playing offense (seeking to change the policy through formal revision) to the generally much easier task of playing defense (blocking or watering down efforts to update policy in response to changing social conditions). Here again, policy terrain is of fundamental importance. The product of formal decision-making procedures is dependent on how much scope and incentive existing public policies create for processes of drift.

The Activist State as a Crucial Macro-Context

So far, this discussion has focused on meso-level arguments that link specific policies or clusters of policies to particular outcomes. But in his 1960 *The Semi-Sovereign People*, among other writings, Schattschneider also stressed that the expanded scale and scope of modern policy activity is

a critical feature of the *macro*-context that shapes political interactions:

While we were looking the other way, the government of the United States became a global operation a decade or two ago. The budget is about two hundred fifty times as large as it was seventy years ago. If you multiply the diameter of a baseball by two hundred fifty very suddenly, you have an explosion. Is it possible to understand American politics without considering the regime a going concern? What kind of operation has the government of the United States become? The changes in the regime are so great that one might well ask whether or not our theoretical equipment is adequate for the comprehension of what has happened. In a purely formal sense we can say the government of the United States is the same one that was established in 1789—in about the same way in which Henry Ford’s bicycle repair shop is the same as Ford Motor Company today.³¹

Schattschneider’s alertness to the reality of big government was prescient, for he wrote on the eve of a quantum increase in state activism. The next two decades saw a further dramatic expansion and nationalization of the “global operation” Schattschneider described.³² Work by policy-focused scholars in the 1970s and 1980s often made much of this transformation.³³ Yet in the Downsian framework, the rise of the activist state is a descriptive detail of little or no theoretical consequence. One is hard pressed to find prominent Downsian works that devote any real attention to understanding this epochal transformation or its consequences for politics.³⁴

This is a serious oversight, because there are good reasons to believe that heightened policy activism represents a fundamental shift in the terrain of American politics. A growing number of policy-focused analyses suggest that politics in an institutional setting of widespread government activism is qualitatively different from politics in an institutional setting where policy activity is much more limited.³⁵ Among the consequences highlighted:

- Increasing policy activism led to a massive shift in interest group activity, creating a much more organized and densely-packed political environment in Washington.³⁶
- The expansion of group activity broke down established iron triangles, contributing to heightened contestation and more partisan policymaking.³⁷ Arguably this was a fundamental source of mounting polarization, as intense groups proliferated and responded to growing incentives to align themselves with one party or the other.³⁸
- Increasing policy density meant increasing interactions among policy activities, heightening complexity and unintended consequences. It also increased group contestation as policy spheres increasingly overlapped, empowered judicial actors who serve as “traffic cops” sorting out the

various collisions, and provided new opportunities for policy entrepreneurship.³⁹

- The scale of existing policy commitments altered the challenges and opportunities facing policymakers on both left and right. Neither side could work with a blank slate. Instead, they had to manage complex coalition-building exercises in already deeply institutionalized policy domains, in which existing policies differed in their visibility to voters, the strength of their vested defenders, and their vulnerability to drift.⁴⁰

These are difficult claims to evaluate systematically, but each has credible evidence behind it. The Washington of today is clearly very different from that of 1960, and the huge expansion of policy activity is a central part of what makes it different—even if this reality fits uncomfortably within the Downsian framework.

In sum, a policy-focused approach sides with the Downsian perspective in stressing the rules of the political game. It parts ways, however, in emphasizing that many of the central rules are set not by formal institutions, but by the extensive policy arrangements associated with modern governance. The good news for scholars is that research focused on behavior has clearly established the significant connection between policy arrangements and both individual and group behavior. The even better news is that this research only begins to tap the potential for understanding how policy makes politics. Most important, by explaining how policy structures have substantial political effects, this work also provides a strong rationale for focusing on how political actors seek to gain control over the “prize” of policy—the topic to which we now turn.

Policy as Prize

At its heart, politics is about the exercise of authority. Winners of political contests are positioned to use the control of the coercive power of the state to impose their preferences on losers through public policies.⁴¹ The stakes are often vast, involving billions of dollars and matters of life and death. For this reason, the battle to control public authority is fierce, ongoing, and highly consequential. Yes, politicians make policies in part to win elections. But for important political players, especially the most knowledgeable, well-resourced, and enduring, elections are just one means to the greater end of exercising coercive authority. For these actors, policies are not a sideshow; they are often the main show.

If the Downsian framework starts with voters and elections and works outward from there, the policy-focused approach starts instead with *what government actually does* and works forward (policy as terrain) and backward (policy as prize). Governance is central not just because it is one of the main determinants of the quality of life in democratic societies and thus of intense concern to citizens as well as

scholars. More crucial from an analytic standpoint, governance is where many of the most important elements of modern political life play out—elements that largely recede from vision in the Downsian perspective.

The first and most important of these elements is organized interests. “The distinction between organized and unorganized interests is about as fundamental and decisive as any distinction can be,” Schattschneider argued.⁴² Yet this distinction is often downplayed or ignored in Downsian work. The massive body of scholarship on race in American politics, for example, has tended to “treat racial inequalities as largely psychological phenomena, rather than acknowledging race as a political construct that was created and has been deployed in order to pursue power and maintain control.”⁴³ Similar observations could be made about research on gender and American politics, which has also focused narrowly on public opinion and electoral dynamics. Comparative politics research, by contrast, has been much more inclined to examine organizational dynamics, alliance-building, and the relationship between public policy and the capacity of social groups to influence parties’ policy priorities.⁴⁴

A policy-focused approach elevates the critical variable of organization above the secondary role it plays in Downsian thinking. We have already seen how policies shape collective political action. Yet collective political actors also seek to shape policy—indeed, this is frequently their prime goal—and they have key advantages over voters in their efforts to do so.

This basic insight feeds into a revised understanding of other elements of the polity—most notably, parties. Once we see policies as the prize for many organized actors, parties no longer look so much like Downsian coalitions of politicians who seek to win elections. Instead, they look more like Schattschneiderian coalitions of powerful groups seeking to reconcile the aim of holding office with the pursuit of substantive policy goals, a balancing act with significantly different implications for how parties behave and how democratic politics function.

Contests over policy bring into focus other critical aspects of political life, too. For starters, we begin to observe the very large asymmetries of information, organizational capacity, and intensity that characterize many struggles over governance. At the same time, we start to see why intense and informed groups that operate over long spans of time and across diverse political arenas have so many advantages over ordinary voters. Finally, we better recognize that coercive political authority can generate durable winners (and durable losers) whose victories (and defeats) last well beyond Downsian cycles of elections and lawmaking.

All these topics are closely related to a central theme in Schattschneider’s work. When he wrote that politics entails the “mobilization of bias,” he meant that policy-

makers frequently respond not to the median voter but to the organized, intense, and well-informed. Moreover, these actors often exert their greatest influence outside of the most visible sites of political contestation. Schattschneider is best remembered for his declaration that “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly choir sings with a strong upper-class accent.”⁴⁵ Yet equally important was his insistence that “a tremendous amount of conflict is controlled by keeping it so private that it is almost invisible.”⁴⁶ If we want to know who governs, we cannot just examine the most prominent political events, such as elections and high-profile votes. Unfortunately, this is precisely what Downsian accounts often do, with major analytic costs.

The Centrality of Organized Political Action

Focusing on policy as prize moves the actors who care most about policy—organized interests—to the heart of the drama. Downsians have placed politicians and voters at center stage, pushing interest groups to the periphery. Strikingly, this marginalization has occurred even as the level of group activity in American politics has dramatically ratcheted up.⁴⁷

Policy-focused analysis, by contrast, has a persuasive basis for taking organized groups much more seriously. Most of those involved in politics in a sustained way participate because they care what government does. Again, politics is a contest where some gain the authority to make decisions of fundamental significance for others. This makes the exercise of authority a central object of political contestation. Precisely for this reason, however, it also makes shaping that exercise a daunting challenge. To do so requires the capacity to overcome collective action problems, mobilize resources, coordinate actions with others, develop extensive expertise, focus sustained attention, and operate flexibly across multiple domains of political authority. Moreover, all of this must typically be done over long periods of time, across shifting partisan environments, despite considerable turnover of elected officials, and in the face of dogged resistance from other resourceful actors. These are not capacities we usually associate with voters. They are the comparative strength of organized interests.

To be sure, organized groups care deeply what voters do, and they frequently try very hard to shift elections their way. But they also are shrewd and experienced enough to place the competition for votes in proper perspective. This explains why even with the recent explosion of campaign funding, only a modest share of the billions that interest groups spend on politics is directly connected to electoral contests.⁴⁸ The vast majority goes instead to efforts to shape mass and elite opinion and to lobbying, where real spending has doubled in just a decade. For powerful groups the true center of action is in Washington, not the swing states.

Organized political action can also take the form of social movements—mobilized populations seeking major change in society’s structure or distribution of rewards.⁴⁹ Crucially, these movements are *organized*. To play a sustained role in politics, movements need resources as well as cadres of leaders and committed activists. They also need an infrastructure to communicate with supporters and frame targets and objectives, so they can effectively exert pressure while sustaining or (ideally) building mass appeal. Such activities, again, have little place in the Downsian framework, which may explain why political scientists have devoted far less attention to social movements than sociologists have. Yet there is substantial research suggesting such movements, combining mass intensity with organized pressure, can have a big impact on political parties and broader contests over policy. Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, for instance, provide compelling evidence that the combination of “top-down” (including deep-pocketed donors and a highly-politicized conservative media) and “bottom-up” resources (involving intense grievances among older white Americans alarmed by rapid social change) made the Tea Party a powerful force in American politics and reshaped the Republican Party.⁵⁰ Examining a longer period, Doug McAdam and Karina Kloos show how social movements challenging the American racial order first transformed the Democratic Party and then triggered a counter-movement that helped pull the Republican Party far to the right even before the emergence of the Tea Party.⁵¹

This focus on the link between groups and policy has three major implications. First, it provides the basis for reconsidering the role of *political parties*. Second, it points to the significance of *policy-relevant information asymmetries* and *multiply-situated actors*. Finally, it allows us to see political victory and defeat in very different terms than is standard in Downsian research: as *high-stakes outcomes* with very large and potentially very durable results.

Policy, Groups, and Parties

Public policy is at the heart of recent efforts to transform how political science understands parties.⁵² Indeed, we see this effort—which has rapidly developed a credible alternative to the Downsian view of parties as electorally-focused coalitions of politicians—as one of the most exciting indicators of the benefits of a more policy-centered approach.

If the Downsian view sees parties as teams of politicians developing a “brand” and crafting appeals to voters, the alternative view suggests that parties are essentially enduring organized coalitions of what Bawn and her colleagues term “intense policy demanders.”⁵³ These intense demanders see policy as the big prize. Their intensity reflects two simple facts: these groups *really* care about their policy demands, and they recognize that voters may not share their preferences. Furthermore, they know that in a vast majoritarian political system the formation of durable coalitions with

other interests is frequently the most promising way to capture the prizes they care about.⁵⁴

This is where parties come in. They are potential vehicles for achieving groups’ intense demands. Party leaders will be attentive to such demands because groups can provide resources they need, offering critical financial and organizational support. Conversely, if powerful groups are sufficiently displeased by a party, they can be a major threat, offering their resources to the party’s opponents or challenging problematic candidates in primaries. Sorting out unreliable candidates can also take place in the “invisible” primary of reputation-building among powerful elites that precedes the actual casting of ballots.⁵⁵ Of course, groups do not offer up support without certain expectations—expectations that overwhelmingly relate to the promotion of policies they favor. Thus, parties face a dual burden. As Downsian analysis suggests, they need to win over voters. Yet they simultaneously need to please their most organized supporters, who have their own distinct priorities. Managing this tension is the true art of modern politics.

In this innovative portrayal of parties, one can see how various pieces of a more policy-focused research agenda come together.⁵⁶ Groups care about policies; if politicians care about groups, they will care about policies as well. By shaping what parties stand for, groups also shape the alternatives before voters—the construction of the political choice-set that Schattschneider memorably defined as “the supreme instrument of power.”⁵⁷

It is also here where many Downsian analysts would push back. Because of electoral pressures, the interests of groups ultimately count for relatively little. Just as in studies of legislatures, what matters is the “pivot” within the electorate who dictates the stance of parties—typically, in the Downsian conception, the median voter. The electoral connection trumps the intense demands of groups. Confidence in the force of this objection is the principal reason why Downsian scholars have downplayed the significance of interest groups in modern politics. Understanding why this objection carries much less weight than most Downsians believe is thus the crucial next stage in our exploration of the Schattschneiderian framework.

Policy, Groups, and Information Asymmetries

When it comes to politics, noted Schattschneider more than fifty years ago, “an amazingly large number of people do not seem to know very much about what is going on.”⁵⁸ Put in more academic terms, there are acute asymmetries of information and intensity between voters and organized interests. Organizations can generally be considered to be well informed. They have the resources to hire specialists, and the durability and incentives to learn from experience over time. Voters, on the other hand, show abundant evidence of what Bawn and her colleagues call

“electoral blind spots.”⁵⁹ They are typically only dimly aware of the policy positions and legislative actions of politicians, and often have a hard time placing candidates ideologically, particularly when candidates are at least nominally on their side. They also frequently make voting decisions on the basis of factors (such as the very recent performance of the economy) that are largely unrelated to the policy stances of politicians.⁶⁰ These blind spots are mostly distinct from the Downsian hypothesis of “rational ignorance”; instead, they showcase significant biases in voter behavior grounded in both human psychology and the large asymmetries of information between ordinary citizens and political elites.

These asymmetries do not just create voter myopia. Even more important, they allow political elites to exploit it.⁶¹ Legislators and other policymakers possess a wide range of techniques for expanding or contracting the size of these blind-spots.⁶² This can be done through careful design of policy, through astute use of legislative procedures, or through carefully crafted rhetoric that frames political debates in ways unthreatening to low-information voters. With messaging discipline, argue Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro, turning Downs on his head, “politicians attempt to *simulate* responsiveness by changing centrist opinion to support their positions,” allowing them to pursue their own, their party’s, or their interest-group allies’ goals.⁶³ Messaging is even more effective when coupled with strategic policy design that highlights some policy effects (say, up-front tax rebates for the middle class) and obscures others (such as big tax cuts for the wealthy in the future).⁶⁴ The exploitation of policy drift—essentially the fine political art of producing change by doing nothing—can also be a very powerful tool for rewarding organized interests with limited risk of agitating voters.⁶⁵

From a Schattschneiderian perspective, democratic politics is often not about choosing between the demands of voters and organized interests. It is about arranging things so that the trade-off is less acute. Expanding the size of the electoral blind spot permits policymakers to combine symbolic responsiveness to voters and substantive responsiveness to interest groups. The key is to recognize that organized groups are knowledgeable and care deeply about policies of which most voters are only dimly aware, and that policymakers, seeking to reconcile the pressures of intense policy demanders and voters, possess a range of techniques for exploiting this asymmetry.

Among the more potent of these techniques is the ability to pursue policy goals outside the most prominent arenas of national lawmaking. In his writings, Schattschneider stressed that the tremendous complexity of American political institutions created a range of relatively hidden venues for achieving or blocking policy change. These venues are precisely where organized political actors with the capacity to extend their influence across various domains of policymaking have the

greatest potential impact. Indeed, policy-centered analysts have often identified such “multiply situated actors”—from social movements to federated voluntary organizations to state-focused business networks—as among the most powerful in achieving long-term policy change.⁶⁶

In each of these cases, policy-focused political scientists are able to follow the thread of a long-run strategic game played out in multiple sites because they are attentive to the substantive stakes and the role of organized actors. This also allows them to see an even more fundamental aspect of politics: the processes that generate enduring transformations of governing authority.

Understanding Durable Victories and Defeats

In the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray stars as a jaded TV weatherman assigned to report from Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Much to his horror, he finds himself reliving the same day over and over again. Downsians should be able to relate. A peculiar characteristic of most American politics scholarship, fixated as it has been on the shifting preferences of voters and their influence on the partisan makeup of government, is its depictions of politics as ever in flux, with no *durable* winners and losers. Elections follow a Downsian logic; this cycle’s loser adjusts and becomes next cycle’s winner. Take out incumbency, David Mayhew observes, and presidential elections over the past century or so have been essentially a coin-toss between the two parties.⁶⁷ The electorate, whose views are usually regarded as a binding constraint on policymakers, fluctuates back and forth over a moderate policy space. Voters operate like a thermostat, bringing the political system back to the middle.⁶⁸ This fluidity follows from a framework emphasizing atomized voters and politicians, operating within a stable set of rules, free to make and remake decisions each and every day. Temporary, not durable, advantages are the rule. In the Downsian world, every day is Groundhog Day.

The situation looks fundamentally different when one focuses on the contest among intense policy demanders who are engaged in struggles over public authority. In a political world with policy at its core, durable outcomes are not just possible; they are the biggest prize of all. Winners get to impose their policy preferences on losers. Often, this means imposing arrangements to which losers must adjust *even if their side wins future elections*.⁶⁹ Of course, this is an important implication of the “policy as terrain” arguments explored earlier. Policies can create facts on the ground, durably altering resources and incentives. Policies can strengthen supporters and weaken losers. In extreme cases, policies can effectively eliminate the losers as a serious force altogether. In the Schattschneiderian world, every day is not Groundhog Day.

Studies that examine policymaking over time have been much more likely to appreciate this crucial dynamic than those focusing on the electoral see-saw. We have

already mentioned Patashnik’s simple but telling example of how airline deregulation quickly drove its biggest opponents, the high-cost airlines, out of business.⁷⁰ Moe’s analysis of public sector collective bargaining, also discussed earlier, has a similar dynamic. On a grander scale, the collapse of Reconstruction led to a series of statutory and constitutional changes, consolidating a Jim Crow regime that locked southern blacks (and many poor whites) out of politics for nearly a century.⁷¹ Indeed, research in American political development on race and ethnicity has repeatedly emphasized the role of institutionalized hierarchies, cemented through policy, that proved stubbornly resistant to liberalizing developments in other domains of politics, precisely because they were deeply embedded in durable coalitions of organized actors hostile to emancipatory changes.⁷²

As a final example, consider the letter a savvy and popular President Eisenhower wrote to his brother concerning the desire of conservatives to roll back the New Deal:

Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history. There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things. Among them are H. L. Hunt (you possibly know his background), a few other Texas oil millionaires, and an occasional politician or business man from other areas. Their number is negligible and they are stupid.⁷³

Eisenhower’s point was that the New Deal had achieved durable victories. Despite his own electoral success, he and other Republicans now operated within a policy space that the consolidation of prior Democratic victories had durably altered. There was no going back.

Eisenhower’s observation captures a fundamental element of politics visible only through the policy-focused lens. Precisely because policy change, rather than electoral triumph, is often the ultimate prize, enduring victories are possible. And because such victories are possible, actors seek to bring them about. To do so requires a durable coalition, a set of actors who are sufficiently dedicated to the goal that they will stay in the fight for the long term and who have the political and organizational resources to influence the exercise of governance over time.⁷⁴

This basic insight about policy coalitions—once so deeply held that analysts felt little need to make it explicit—is at the heart of long traditions of work in both comparative politics and American political development.⁷⁵ Shifting coalitions of interests battle to exercise authority in order to impose their preferences through governance. The potential for policy trajectories to be highly path-dependent makes these efforts profoundly important. It is why comparativists can identify distinct “regimes” covering huge areas of public life like the welfare state and a nation’s model of capitalism.⁷⁶ These regimes are grounded in durable policy arrangements, resulting from

fierce contestation among organized interests. Although often strongly connected to one party or another at the outset, these arrangements are sustained over time by supportive coalitions that have transcended and outlasted any specific electoral majority. Their endurance is testament to the capacity of long-lived political actors to use government authority to refashion economies and societies in enduring ways.

Two Applications

Ultimately the value of a research program rests in its capacity to address important questions about the political world. In this section, we offer brief discussions of two central topics in contemporary American politics: imbalanced partisan polarization driven by the asymmetric retreat of the parties from the center and the steep rise in economic disparities driven by the increased concentration of income at the top. Each of these developments posed a stark challenge to the Downsian framework. In the language of Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, they constituted “anomalies”—outcomes that were in conflict with paradigm-induced expectations. In each case, initial efforts to shore up Downsian arguments faltered. In each case, Downsian scholars began to incorporate, in tentative ways, the role of policy and political organization. And in each case, we suggest, a fuller embrace of the policy-focused perspective would provide additional leverage that the Downsian approach has failed to deliver.

Asymmetric Polarization

Over the past decade, students of American politics have focused increased attention on the growing divide between the two parties.⁷⁷ Indeed, Downsian analysts deserve enormous credit for identifying and highlighting this phenomenon. The development of sophisticated techniques for placing legislators on a left/right spectrum using congressional roll-call votes—such as the ubiquitous DW-Nominate scores developed by Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal and refined in collaboration with Nolan McCarty—has made it possible to track polarization in Congress over extended periods of time, fueling a large and important literature.

Nonetheless, the Downsian perspective has proved far less capable of grappling with one of the most striking and consequential features of growing polarization: its asymmetric character. Overwhelmingly, the evidence suggests, the growth of partisan polarization is a result of GOP moves to the right, rather than an equal retreat of Democrats and Republicans from the center.⁷⁸ Furthermore, asymmetric polarization is not just limited to Congress. Extensions of DW-Nominate to vice-presidential candidates who previously served in Congress show the same pattern.⁷⁹ So do (more weakly) data on state legislatures.⁸⁰ Similar techniques used to place Supreme Court justices on a left-right scale show that

while current Democratic appointees on the Court are quite moderate by modern standards, four of the current GOP appointees are among the six most conservative justices to serve on the Court in the last seventy-five years, while the fifth (Kennedy) is in the top ten.⁸¹ Textual analysis of party platforms indicates that the Republican party's official stands, as reflected in their presidential-election-year platforms, started to diverge sharply from Democrats' in 1980, suggesting that "Republicans are the primary source of polarization in the American system."⁸² Finally, and perhaps most important, these asymmetries are reflected in and reinforced by what Mark Tushnet has called "constitutional hardball"—the greater tendency of the GOP to violate established norms (without breaking legal restrictions) to gain partisan advantage.⁸³

The Downsian approach has a very hard time making sense of such a persistent and lopsided departure from the center in a competitive party system. After all, there is nothing in public-opinion data suggesting a similar move to the right among voters on central policy issues.⁸⁴ To Downsians, the continuing right turn of the GOP poses something of an existential puzzle: Does electoral competition really matter so little for the positioning of the parties?

Revealingly, the initial Downsian response was denial. Fiorina, for instance, writes in good Downsian fashion as if asymmetric polarization is almost a logical impossibility:

So long as only one party moves away from the center . . . electoral punishment results, and even ideologically motivated party activists eventually get the message But if both parties move away from the center at a more or less equal distance away from the mainstream, then electoral punishment need not result. Voters will be less enthusiastic about their choices . . . but given a choice between two extremes, they can only elect an extremist.⁸⁵

Even Fiorina's caveat—which appears to be designed to cover the fact that we *do* observe polarization despite theoretical expectations—seems shaky given his analysis. Wouldn't Downsian pressures create incentives for one party or the other to move to the center, leading this equilibrium of matching polarization to unravel?

In a more recent discussion, Fiorina allows that political scientists would probably lay "the preponderance of blame on the Republicans." But then he seems to discount this by noting that political science is "a Democratic-leaning discipline." Rather than considering the kind of evidence just noted or seeking to explain it, he picks out a few journalistic accounts of particular incidents to back up his view that accounts of asymmetry "let the Democrats off too easily" and "there are considerations that should be added to the Democratic side of the blame scale."⁸⁶

Within a Schattschneiderian framework, however, it is not only easy to imagine durable polarization; we can also identify some of the key mechanisms that might

produce and sustain it, even if it is asymmetric. One crucial mechanism is the "electoral blind spot" discussed previously. Asymmetric polarization becomes much more plausible if the more extreme party identifies techniques to soften the trade-off between rewarding its intense policy demanders and winning elections. Nor should we assume that politicians always seek to maximize electoral prospects. Powerful groups who see policy as the prize may push politicians to place a priority on policy gains rather than vote maximization. If these groups have the capacity to punish candidates at other stages of the electoral process (for example, candidate recruitment or primaries) or to provide resources to candidates that help attenuate the trade-off between policy extremism and vote maximization, they may pull politicians substantially away from the median voter. The electoral trade-off does not disappear, of course. But as politicians move from the center, the policy-focused perspective suggests we should picture a gradual slope of declining electoral performance rather than the abrupt plunge into the political abyss implied by the median-voter theorem.

Crucially, there is no reason why the significance of these factors need be symmetrical between the parties. One of the most exciting contributions of a Schattschneiderian reconceptualization of parties is to remind us that they are not mirror images of each other. Rather than being equivalent loose collections of politicians and voters, they are distinct social coalitions that have quite different internal structures. Different coalitional bases may dictate different trade-offs.

In the U.S. case, one plausible source of asymmetric polarization is the growing political power of business and the wealthy, which is likely to affect the two parties very differently. Although the political behavior of business sectors varies considerably, much business investment in the Democratic Party is a form of "insurance" intended to moderate the party's policy stances.⁸⁷ The rise of a powerful business-moderate coalition within the party during the 1980s, embodied in the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), provides a particularly telling example.⁸⁸ Business contributions to the GOP, by contrast, are often intended to foster an aggressive pro-business policy agenda. Thus the growing power of business and the wealthy in the American polity could simultaneously moderate policy stances in the Democratic Party while encouraging the GOP shift to the right. It may also help explain why the mobilization of centrist, countervailing forces within the GOP has proved so much more difficult than Downsian logic would predict. The task of organizing a durable party faction creates formidable collective action problems and serious political risks.⁸⁹ In contrast to the successful case of the DLC, the balance of organized political forces within the GOP—Christian conservatives, the Tea Party, the National Rifle Association, and, at least until now, the most politicized elements of the business

community—have proved highly unfavorable to moderate organization. Given this balance of organized forces, extremism may be individually rational for politicians even if it potentially damages the party’s brand and its prospects for winning congressional majorities and presidential elections.

In sum, key pieces of the Schattschneiderian framework can help make sense of asymmetric polarization. The “electoral blind-spot” creates opportunities. It is the balance of organized forces within each party—the combination of strong, intense, and well-organized policy demanders favoring positions far to the right of the median voter and a weak organizational foundation for moderate groups within the GOP—that primarily explains why Republicans have most aggressively exploited those opportunities.

The Politics of Rising Income Inequality

The value of policy-focused analysis is equally evident when we turn to the evolution of the American political economy. By “political economy,” we mean the study of how economic and political systems interact, not the use of formal game theory (which tellingly is how political economy is often defined within the American politics subfield). Political economy, of course, is a quintessentially Schattschneiderian field. It concentrates on organized actors and the stakes involved in struggles over governance. It embraces context and substance. “Labor” and “business” are considered highly relevant and distinct interests, rather than being lumped together within the more general, de-contextualized category of “groups.”

Under the sway of the Downsian approach, however, generations of scholars studying American politics largely abandoned the study of political economy. This abandonment contrasts with the much more policy-focused subfields of international relations and comparative politics, where political economy has been perhaps the most robust area of study over the past three decades. In the American politics subfield, as Graham Wilson laments, “there are about a hundred political scientists studying parties and elections for every one studying business and politics.”⁹⁰

Yet the startling changes in the American political economy—especially sharply rising income inequality—are hard to ignore. And to their credit, leading Downsians have started to face these facts.⁹¹ As they have, they have increasingly confronted the limits of the Downsian framework. Initially, most tried to assemble accounts focused on the voter-election-legislator triad. More recently, however, they have started to incorporate policy and organized interests, albeit tentatively—that is, to move away from Downs and toward Schattschneider.⁹²

Like asymmetric polarization, the massive increase in inequality poses a major challenge for the Downsian perspective. In a competitive system, after all, rising inequality should create pressures for a government response, as politicians vie to attract majority support.

Indeed, in standard median-voter models of redistribution, greater inequality in the distribution of market income leads to greater median-voter support for redistribution and, thereby, more redistributive policy.⁹³ The challenge is only intensified by the extreme concentration of recent income gains in the United States, which make us an outlier among affluent democracies. The share of household income going to the richest 1 percent of Americans has more than doubled since the 1970s, with the share going to the top 0.1 percent quadrupling.⁹⁴ A Downsian analysis might be able to accommodate a modest broadening of the income distribution. (Perhaps those on the losing end of rising inequality are not voting, for example.) But it has a much harder time explaining the lack of response to the remarkable concentration of post-1970s incomes gains.

Despite these realities, the pulling away of the rich featured surprisingly little in the first political analyses of rising inequality. Indeed, political scientists working within the Downsian framework initially tried to show that the median-voter model could handle this striking anomaly. This response was exemplified by McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal’s important book, *Polarized America*. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal argued that the influx of low-income immigrants had muted pressures for redistribution. Because immigration brought a substantial number of nonvoters into the lower part of the income distribution and pulled down average income, they argued, “the relative income of the median voter in the United States is in fact not worse today than it was thirty years ago.”⁹⁵ Even a moment’s glance at the distributional tables indicates, however, that this cannot be true. According to the Congressional Budget Office, over half of the increase in the U.S. Gini coefficient between 1979 and 2007 is due just to growth in income at and above the ninety-ninth percentile.⁹⁶ The median voter is clearly losing relative ground even when immigration is taken into account.

A second prominent response to the difficulties facing the Downsian framework was to begin amending the model. This is how we see much of Larry Bartels’s innovative argumentation in his landmark *Unequal Democracy*.⁹⁷ Bartels claims that voters recognize and are concerned about rising inequality, but have only a hazy idea of how inequality and policies pertaining to it affect them and only a limited capacity to assign responsibility to create strong incentives for politicians to pursue more beneficial policies. He argues, for example, that Republicans have been able to win in spite of GOP presidents’ harmful effects on most voters because they are better at timing the business cycle, producing growth just before elections for which myopic voters reward them. In short, Bartels convincingly shows that there is a large electoral blind-spot.

Bartels breaks important new ground—in part by breaking from Downsian assumptions. Nonetheless, *Unequal Democracy* leaves mostly unanswered the question of where the political pressure for less egalitarian policy

outcomes come from. In other words, if voters do not run the show, who does? In a much-discussed chapter, Bartels argues that the parties pursue distinct distributional policies, and he shows stark differences in economic outcomes under Republican and Democratic presidents, with less-affluent voters doing better under Democrats. But his portrayal of parties as coalitions of voters leaves largely unexplained why these distinct orientations exist.

Perhaps most telling of all given their broad aspirations, these recent analyses pay strikingly limited attention to organized interests. In both *Unequal Democracy* and *Polarized America*, unions and corporations are hardly mentioned. (Unions have four references in the index of Bartels's book—two related to the minimum wage—while the National Election Studies has twenty.) In neither of these books is there any real investigation of the shifting balance of organized political forces in American politics and how that has affected inequality.⁹⁸ Nor, for all their emphasis on the political roots of rising inequality, is there much attention to the specific policies that have generated the distributional outcomes that are putatively the object of study.

If these are topics that the Downsian approach marginalizes, they are—to the contrary—the central concerns of a policy-focused perspective. First, in the policy-centered perspective, the role of government in the political economy is not just a question of the balance between the two parties. Equally important is the matter of where the two parties situate themselves with respect to the most important issues of governance. This in turn is likely to depend on the shifting balance of organized interests, particularly the balance between organized labor and business. For instance, we would emphasize that important elements of the Democratic Party have responded to the rising relative power of corporate America and the growing role of money in politics by repositioning themselves on a number of critical issues, including taxation and deregulation, in ways that have undercut the party's commitment to egalitarian policies. It is worth stressing that this is also consistent with a Schattschneiderian account of asymmetric polarization, in which the growing power of business interests exerts moderating pressure on the Democratic Party but not the GOP.

Second, the politics of growing inequality is understandable only once we explain precisely how policy has contributed to the trend. If the central Downsian puzzles are whether and why voters sanction rising inequality, the central Schattschneiderian puzzles are whether and why government policy has contributed to this dramatic shift. "Policy" here includes not just antipoverty benefits and the minimum wage—the policies that have received the most attention from Downsian analysts—but also rules that shape capital and labor market outcomes at the top: financial regulation, the regulation of corporate governance, industrial relations policy, specific tax benefits for the most affluent, and the like. In this investigation, moreover, we

cannot just equate public policy with big legislative changes. We must also recognize the crucial process of policy drift. Patterns of government *inaction* as well as action are integral to the structuring of markets over time.

Indeed, there is considerable evidence that policy drift was a fundamental source of rising inequality. Both financial deregulation and the weakening of unions occurred partly because policies were not updated to reflect dramatic economic shifts. In each of these two areas, inaction was not inadvertent; it reflected the mobilization of groups seeking to encourage the further erosion of existing policies. The severe decline of organized labor in the United States and the increasing scope of unregulated finance was, in significant part, a *political* outcome driven by the failure to update policy. In each area, there were alternatives that would have resulted in more equal outcomes that had prominent advocates. The opponents of such reforms, possessing formidable and growing organizational resources, mobilized effectively to stop them.⁹⁹

The need for a more thorough reassessment of Downs is signaled by a recent article by McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal—now joined by Adam Bonica. Rather than a more diffuse rise in inequality, their article focuses specifically on the sharp shift towards the top 1 percent, which poses much greater difficulty for a Downsian framework. This more recent analysis largely abandons the earlier focus on the relative position of the median voter. Instead, it places much more emphasis on the growing political influence of top income groups, and on how partisan polarization abets drift (though they do not use the term). A similar reorientation away from voters as the driving force in politics is evident in the recent work of McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal on the financial crisis, Bartels's recent work (with Benjamin Page and Jason Seawright) on the distinctive beliefs of the super-rich, and the new research by Martin Gilens and Page that appears in this issue.¹⁰⁰ The growing appreciation of policy-focused insights suggests that scholars are beginning to recognize the shortcomings of the Downsian perspective for understanding contemporary political life.

Bringing Policy Back In

Recent trends in American politics have not been kind to the Downsian paradigm. Parties not only fail to converge, they diverge asymmetrically. Voters don't push back against rising inequality as expected, or at least they don't have the influence that Downsian thinking would suggest. Some political voices are durably muted due to the erosion of organizational representation as well as new forms of disenfranchisement. Interest groups proliferate, spending more and more on lobbying and campaigns—even as they cluster on the periphery of the Downsian map. Battles for control of public authority rock state capitals and Washington, DC, radiating outward from familiar

venues into those that Downsian analyses rarely reach. Against this backdrop, the map of American politics that Downs sketched more than a half century ago looks less and less like the reality of American politics. More and more, in fact, this map looks peculiar to a particular and perhaps unusual era, rather than a universal template for understanding American politics.¹⁰¹

To resolve these growing anomalies, scholars working with the Downsian paradigm have made welcome moves toward the growing body of work that we have called policy-focused political science. Yet there is still much to be done. Asymmetric polarization and economic inequality are just two cases where policy-oriented work usefully reorients analysis. The study of race and gender in politics would also benefit deeply from such an enlarged perspective. Federalism and social movements are other examples of prominent political phenomena marginalized in a Downsian framework but ripe for effective study from a more policy-oriented approach.

The waning of the Downsian era has the potential to open up new opportunities for constructive engagement between electorally-oriented studies and those that place public policy and organized groups at the heart of analysis. Yet a mushy middle ground would be little better than the current bifurcation. Instead, movement forward will occur when scholars meaningfully bring the insights of the policy-focused perspective into their work not as an ad hoc supplement to an essentially Downsian approach but as a shaper of theories, methods, and research agendas. A framework that treats the struggle over public authority as an afterthought will not produce a convincing account of many key features of political life.

If we start outside this framework, where might we go? Within the study of lawmaking, we anticipate that the critical shift will be away from an understanding of legislative politics mostly in terms of relative ideological location and individual voting and toward an emphasis on the absolute positions of politicians on critical issues of the day. Moreover, those positions would be understood with reference to particular substantive uses of government. As a result, the character of the status quo—not just the structure of prior policy commitments, but also their potential vulnerability to external forces—would become a critical consideration. External forces, like technological or demographic change, and large shocks, such as military conflict and economic downturns—all powerful influences on the likelihood of drift—would come to be seen as extremely important shapers of outcomes, and analytically tractable as well. At the same time, students of legislative politics would be in a far stronger position to assess the significance of those outcomes, rather than implicitly treating all votes as equal in importance.

More broadly, interest groups and political economy would again become central concerns of American political science—but on stronger theoretical and methodological

foundations. On the theoretical front, we now have the tools to understand not just how policies encourage groups to mobilize but, more important, how they encourage groups to mobilize *in particular ways*. Five decades after Olson’s classic work, scholars of American politics continue to devote insufficient attention to the crucial question of why organized political activity has the distribution it does, or what this distribution means for substantive outcomes. Policy-focused work can, and in fact has started to, remedy this. Within political economy in particular, political scientists could regain their comparative advantage within the social sciences: their ability to offer convincing explanations of how social cleavages become embedded in organized political activity in ways that create enduring patterns of government action.

The policy-focused approach would also require greater methodological eclecticism, in contrast with the singular emphasis on large-*n* data. In the abstract, analysis of large data sets has well-known advantages over more focused or qualitatively-oriented investigations. In the actual conduct of research, however, there is a real tension between gathering more and more data and actually defining and examining the most consequential features of the political environment. Starting with a focus on significant exercises of public authority, as the policy-focused approach does, is not a panacea, nor will it produce much insight if research is poorly designed. But it avoids the arguably greater and certainly more common mistake of amassing copious information on outcomes that are so thinly defined or distantly related to the actual topic of interest that no amount of statistical ingenuity will yield real insights. No matter how gifted the scholars, no method can spin empirical straw into scientific gold.

Elsewhere in this issue, Gilens and Page present substantial evidence that, across a range of issues, the views of the affluent and corporate groups carry much more weight in shaping policy than the views of the median voter. In a striking and refreshingly self-reflective commentary on this piece, Bartels notes that these findings cast serious doubt on the notion of “majoritarian electoral democracy,” which closely corresponds to what we have called the Downsian framework. This approach, observes Bartels, “with its emphasis on public opinion, elections and representation, provides the theoretical backbone of most contemporary political science (including mine). The training of most graduate students (including mine) is primarily couched in that framework. But Gilens’s and Page’s work makes that look like a bad scientific bet, wishfully ignoring most of what actually drives American policy-making.”¹⁰²

As Bartels’s language suggests, research priorities are not mere questions of taste. They are informed bets designed to pay off in greater understanding of the most important elements of political life. We have argued that in studying modern American politics, the Downsian paradigm is

frequently a bad scientific bet. The Downsian triangle of voters, legislators, and roll-call votes is a Bermuda Triangle for critical questions about contemporary politics.

In his 1942 book, *Party Government*, Schattschneider observed that “possession of the vast resources of modern government, its authority, its organization, administrative establishment, and so on, will provide something for nearly everyone willing to join hands in the political enterprise. The winners get so much more than the losers that the difference is worth the struggle. But *power* is the common denominator of all their ambitions.”¹⁰³ Terry Moe has persuasively argued in this journal that American political science must seriously engage once again with the concept of power, calling, as we do, for renewed attention to the use of coercive authority.¹⁰⁴ Related and no less pressing, American political science needs to reclaim Schattschneider’s observation that the “vast resources of modern government” are at the heart of political conflict. Indeed, the rationale for this focus is even stronger than when Schattschneider wrote.

Once we recognize this, we see politics for what it is: a contest with substantive, enduring stakes. Nobody wins all the time, but important players seek and often achieve durable victories. Awareness of this central fact can change the way we look at the political process—which actors we see as important, where the main action is, and what shapes the capacity of political actors to get what they want. We need to bring policy back in, not just to better understand *what* government does, but also to better understand *why*.

Notes

- 1 Fiorina 2009, xvii.
- 2 Congleton 2004.
- 3 Grofman 2004.
- 4 Downs 1957, 74.
- 5 Mayhew 1974.
- 6 Downs 1957, 28.
- 7 Schattschneider 1935.
- 8 Soss and Mettler 2003.
- 9 Schattschneider 1935, 288.
- 10 Arguments about “policy feedback” are sometimes traced back to canonical sources such as Lowi 1964 and Wilson 1980. Yet these arguments are really about the structure of issues and the associated (diffuse or concentrated) winners and losers. They are not institutionalist arguments about how specific structures of public policy can influence politics. Recent strands of work on this topic stem largely from lines of argument set down by Theda Skocpol and her collaborators in the 1980s; Weir and Skocpol 1985. See also Heclo 1974.
- 11 Esping-Andersen 1990; Pierson 1993, 1994; Huber and Stephens 2001; Hacker 2002; Mettler 2002; Campbell 2003.
- 12 Soss 1999; Campbell 2003; Mettler 2002.
- 13 Weaver and Lerman 2010; Mettler 2011.
- 14 Schattschneider 1935, 288.
- 15 Olson 1965.
- 16 Marwell and Oliver 1993.
- 17 Moe 1980; Walker 1991.
- 18 Skocpol 2003, 2007; Baumgartner, Leech, and Mahoney 2003; Leech et al. 2005.
- 19 Moe 2012.
- 20 Leech et al 2005, 28.
- 21 Jacobs and Weaver forthcoming.
- 22 Vogel 1989; Hacker and Pierson 2010a.
- 23 Patashnik 2008, 4.
- 24 Pierson 2004.
- 25 Hacker 2002.
- 26 Krehbiel 1998; Brady and Volden 1998.
- 27 Hacker 2004; Hacker and Pierson 2010b.
- 28 Hacker 2004; see also McCarty 2007.
- 29 Rae 1975; Hacker and Pierson 2010b.
- 30 Hacker and Pierson 2010b. Here our argument parallels Patashnik’s (2008) emphasis on market dynamism as an underappreciated factor driving political change. Again, these are dynamics that approaches inattentive to policy content are unlikely to take into consideration.
- 31 Schattschneider 1960, 115–16.
- 32 Mayhew 1991, 81. See also Derthick 1990; Melnick 1994; Skowronek 1993; Vogel 1989, Fiorina 1977.
- 33 Heclo 1978; Wilson 1980.
- 34 Fiorina 2009 is a partial exception, and a revealing one since its exceptionalism reflects Fiorina’s growing misgivings about the Downsian “master theory.” [see n.1]
- 35 A parallel argument could be made about the National Security State. Astonishingly, the rise of the United States to superpower status with far-flung military commitments is not treated as a significant matter for social scientists seeking to understand our politics. Today, the fact that the United States accounts for two-fifths of global military spending is essentially a non-issue within leading academic scholarship on American politics.
- 36 Leech et al. 2005.
- 37 Heclo 1978; Baumgartner and Jones 1993.
- 38 Pierson 2014.
- 39 Melnick 1994; Baumgartner and Jones 1993.
- 40 Pierson 1994; Jacobs and Skocpol 2011; Mettler 2011.
- 41 Moe 2005.
- 42 Schattschneider 1942, 21.
- 43 Strolovitch, Warren, and Frymer 2006.
- 44 On gender, e.g., see Orloff 2009.
- 45 Schattschneider 1960, 34–35.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 7.

- 47 For example, the number of national associations increased 390 percent between 1959 and 1995; Baumgartner and Leech 1998.
- 48 Drutman 2010.
- 49 McCarthy and Zald 1977.
- 50 Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin 2011.
- 51 McAdam and Kloos 2014.
- 52 Bawn et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2008.
- 53 Bawn et al. 2012.
- 54 Hacker and Pierson 2012.
- 55 Cohen et al. 2008.
- 56 It is worth stressing that Schattschneider, especially in his earlier work, often treated “party” and “pressure groups” as broad alternatives. His later writing moves closer to the formulation offered here. Because their perspective draws on components that were prominent in Schattschneider’s work, we believe that Bawn et al. (2012) are correct to see their own work as closely linked to his.
- 57 Schattschneider 1960, 66.
- 58 Ibid., 128.
- 59 Bawn et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2008.
- 60 Bartels 2008; Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2013; Healy and Lenz 2014.
- 61 Bartels 2008; Mettler 2011; Lenz 2012; Culpepper 2010.
- 62 Weaver 1988; Arnold 1990.
- 63 Hacker and Pierson 2005b; Van Houweling forthcoming; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 44.
- 64 Hacker and Pierson 2005a.
- 65 Hacker and Pierson 2010b.
- 66 For example, Melnick 1994; Teles 2008; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Karch 2007. It is worth noting that the downgrading of federalism as a feature of the American political order, even as it arguably becomes a more prominent dimension of our politics, is one of the most revealing blind spots of the Downsian framework.
- 67 Mayhew 2000.
- 68 Erikson, MacKeun, and Stimson 2002.
- 69 Moe 2005.
- 70 Patashnik 2008.
- 71 Keyssar 2000.
- 72 For example, Lieberman 2001; Smith 1997.
- 73 Eisenhower 1954.
- 74 Hacker and Pierson 2012.
- 75 Skowronek 1993; Gourevitch 1986.
- 76 Pierson 2004; Esping-Andersen 1990; Huber and Stephens 2001; Hall and Soskice 2001; Thelen 2005.
- 77 Abramowitz 2010; Fiorina 2005; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008.
- 78 Hacker and Pierson 2005b; Mann and Ornstein 2012.
- 79 The average DW-Nominate score for Democratic vice-presidential nominees between 1976 and 1988 was $-.361$. From 1992–2012 it was $-.317$ (i.e., a small move towards the center). The average score for GOP nominees between 1976 and 1988 was $.322$. From 1992 to 2012 it was $.490$ (i.e., a very large move to the right). Of course, this latter figure excludes Sarah Palin, who had not served in Congress. Silver 2012.
- 80 Schorr 2013.
- 81 Liptak 2010.
- 82 Jordan, Webb, and Wood 2014.
- 83 Tushnet 2004. Admittedly, categorizing such instances is tricky. Moreover, as can be expected where intense partisan conflict escalates, transgressions have occurred on both sides. Nonetheless, Republicans have largely led the way and deserve exclusive or primary responsibility for such hardball tactics as routinized use of the filibuster to block virtually all initiatives and nominees of the majority party, repeated government shutdowns, resort to mid-decade reapportionments, systematic efforts to disenfranchise voters viewed as unlikely to support the GOP, refusal to allow Senate votes on appointments for statutorily-established bodies to prevent those bodies from functioning or to force legislative concessions, and extensive “hostage-taking” related to debt-ceiling increases. In our view, the impeachment of President Clinton also belongs in this category. So, arguably, does the extraordinary legal reasoning of the court’s majority in *Bush v. Gore*.
- 84 Stimson 2012.
- 85 Fiorina 2005, 117–118.
- 86 Fiorina 2013, 856.
- 87 Wand 2010.
- 88 Hacker and Pierson 2010a.
- 89 Rubin 2013.
- 90 Wilson 2006, 33.
- 91 Bartels 2008; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006.
- 92 Hacker and Pierson 2010a.
- 93 Meltzer and Richard 1981.
- 94 Hacker and Pierson 2010a.
- 95 McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006, 118, 119.
- 96 CBO 2011, 16.
- 97 Bartels 2008.
- 98 One of Bartels’s four references to unions, for example, concerns a statistical analysis of the declining real value of the minimum wage between 1949 and 2004 that includes union density among the explanatory variables. In line with his emphasis on partisanship, Bartels stresses the role of rising GOP numbers in Congress. Yet he notes that his “statistical analyses . . . also suggest that the fate of the minimum wage has hinged even more crucially on the fortunes of the Democratic Party’s most important ally in this policy domain, organized labor” (240). Indeed, his results imply that the cumulative

impact of union decline is roughly three to four times as large as shifts in the partisan composition of Congress—a finding suggestive of a considerable role for the influence of organized groups. Having noted the result, however, Bartels simply drops the matter.

- 99 Hacker and Pierson 2010a; Enns et al. 2014.
100 Bonica et al. 2013; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Gilens and Page 2014.
101 This may well be a return to the modal pattern of American politics. The partisan struggles of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in which successive deployments of government authority fundamentally remade the polity, look more like contemporary American politics than they do the mid-century pattern—though, of course, the scope of federal government activity has expanded enormously. We are indebted to David Mayhew for this point.
102 Bartels 2014.
103 Schattschneider 1942, 37.
104 Moe 2005.

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