

## Confronting Asymmetric Polarization

*Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson*

The goal of this volume is to explore possible solutions to a host of problems associated with polarization. Effective prescription, however, hinges on accurate diagnosis. Far too many discussions of polarization are based on a flawed one: that polarization is broadly similar in degree and kind at both ends of the political spectrum. This claim that political polarization is symmetrical is false: polarization is mainly driven by a sharp retreat from moderation on the right side of the spectrum. This development has occurred across multiple dimensions, from voting patterns and intensity of preferences to concrete policy demands and willingness to use once-rare hardball tactics. Prescriptions that ignore or downplay this reality are very likely to be ineffective and may even make the real problems worse.

This chapter briefly summarizes the evidence that contemporary polarization is asymmetric, before turning to a slightly longer discussion of the mechanisms that generate and sustain this outcome. This discussion in turn provides the basis for identifying initiatives that might address the central and most corrosive aspect of our “polarized politics”: the ever greater extremism of the modern Republican Party.

### POLARIZATION IS ASYMMETRIC

Although it is still not conventional to frame discussions of polarization as asymmetric, there is mounting evidence that the increasing distance between the two parties is primarily a consequence of the Republican Party’s 35-year march to the right (Hacker and Pierson 2005; Mann and Ornstein 2012; Theriault 2013). As the creators of DW-Nominate scores, the core data that have been used to document rising elite polarization, recently put it, “We should be careful not to equate the two parties’ roles in contemporary political polarization: the data are clear that this is a Republican-led phenomenon

where very conservative Republicans have replaced moderate Republicans and Southern Democrats . . . Moreover, the rise of the “Tea Party” will likely only move Congressional Republicans further away from the political center” (Hare, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2012).

Extensions of DW-Nominate to presidents and to vice-presidential candidates show the same pattern. So do (more weakly) data on state legislatures (Shor 2013). Similar techniques used to place Supreme Court justices on a left–right scale show that, although current Democratic appointees on the Court are 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 75 years, whereas the fifth (Kennedy) is in the top 10 (Liptak 2010).

Other signs of asymmetry are more difficult to quantify, but increasingly hard to ignore. Most important is the striking and intensifying pattern over the past 20 years of what Tushnet (2004) has called “constitutional hardball.” In the past two decades – since asymmetric polarization entered a new and more intense phase with the rise to power of Newt Gingrich – the GOP has repeatedly violated established norms (without breaking legal restrictions) to gain partisan advantage. Admittedly, categorizing such instances is a tricky exercise. Moreover, as can be expected when intense partisan conflict escalates, one can point to transgressions on both sides. When norms are broken and conflict intensifies, both sides feel strong pressure to “fight fire with fire.” Nonetheless, Republicans have largely led the way and deserve exclusive or primary responsibility for the following:

- routinized use of the filibuster to block virtually all initiatives of the majority party
- the 1995 government shutdown
- the impeachment of President Clinton
- resort to mid-decade reapportionments
- systematic efforts to disenfranchise voters viewed as unlikely to support the GOP
- refusal to allow Senate votes on *any* appointments for statutorily established bodies as a means to prevent those bodies from functioning or to force legislative concessions (what Mann and Ornstein [2012] call “the new nullification”)
- “hostage-taking” related to debt ceiling increases

This list is neither short nor are the items trivial. Indeed, taken together they constitute a slow-moving constitutional crisis.<sup>1</sup> It is this set of practices

<sup>1</sup> To avoid getting bogged down in side arguments, this discussion excludes two very significant episodes that we would personally include: the Supreme Court’s decision in *Bush v. Gore* and

that led Mann and Ornstein (2012), two of the most respected and moderate voices in the profession, to recently conclude, “The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”

### *Why an Accurate Description Matters*

Elite discourse – in journalism, academia, and foundations – is intensely resistant to the very strong evidence that polarization is primarily about steadily increasing GOP extremism. Regardless of what the evidence may show, to argue that one party is more responsible than another for political dysfunction is seen as itself evidence of bias, not to mention bad manners.<sup>2</sup> Political scientists have an additional reason for resistance: our dominant “Downsian” theoretical apparatus, which emphasizes the centrality to political outcomes of voter opinion and formal rules, has a hard time explaining how asymmetric polarization can persist over time.

There is a plausible argument that symmetrical polarization can be explained in Downsian terms. Politicians are not punished for moving toward the extreme if their opponents are doing the same thing to an equal degree (Fiorina 2005).<sup>3</sup> In this framework asymmetric polarization is much harder to understand – indeed, it should not even be possible over the medium run. Instead, we should anticipate what we call the “Downsian corrective”: fear of losing elections should force the more extreme party to moderate. Yet those waiting for “the fever to break” (as President Obama memorably put it) have been waiting for Godot. The GOP has continued to move right for more than a generation. If anything, the process seems to be accelerating rather than reversing.<sup>4</sup> Understanding why the Downsian corrective remains so weak in practice helps clarify what is driving asymmetric polarization and, by implication, how effective various possible reforms might be.

the willingness of four GOP appointees to strike down the entirety of the Affordable Care Act – the signature statutory result of the Democrats’ sweeping electoral victory in 2008 (and a bill that essentially no prominent figures regarded as raising major constitutional issues during the long and intense debate over passage).

<sup>2</sup> Despite their long-standing status in the establishment, Mann and Ornstein were unable to get a single airing for their views on the Sunday Washington talk shows.

<sup>3</sup> Although it is not clear to us why this constitutes an equilibrium. Shouldn’t one party see an advantage in taking a small step toward the center?

<sup>4</sup> We have short memories. John Boehner may be the GOP’s “establishment” figure today, but two decades ago he was the chairman of the Conservative Opportunity Society, a major organizational vehicle for Gingrich’s efforts to break the moderate faction of the GOP and push the party sharply to the right.

It is easy to see why *as individuals* GOP politicians in the House and Senate have faced strong incentives to move rightward. Most GOP extremists will not pay an electoral price at all for moving in that direction – on the contrary, they pay a price for moderation. GOP elected officials (especially in the House, but to a lesser degree in the Senate) generally represent electorates that lean strongly Republican. In the House, a combination of gerrymandering and the electorally inefficient distribution of Democratic voters (with high concentrations in urban areas) gives the GOP a sizable structural advantage. Most members of the Republican caucus quite reasonably see a loss of support in a GOP primary as their largest electoral danger (Jacobson 2013). For example, the 80 GOP representatives who signed a letter urging House Speaker John Boehner to pass the Continuing Resolution defunding Obamacare hail from districts where Mitt Romney had defeated the president by an average of 23% (Lizza 2013).

The GOP's base is not just large. It is also intense – quicker and quicker to perceive the stakes in political conflict as very high and to seek to punish those whom it sees as insufficiently loyal. That intensity is reflected and strongly reinforced by the presence of increasingly organized groups that monitor the behavior of elected officials and are ready and often eager to mount or back a credible primary challenge. Standing alongside these groups is a large and fiercely partisan media (Fox News and talk radio) for which there is simply no equivalent on the other side. Given the strength (size, intensity, and organized backing) of this base, it is far more costly to be moderate (and face a well-funded primary challenge) than to stay at or move toward the extreme. Even if extremism modestly increases the risk of general election defeat, the electoral tradeoff remains beneficial.

All that being said, asymmetric polarization may carry risks for the party as a whole. During the last two cycles, the selection of extremist candidates in winnable contests may well have cost the GOP control over the Senate (Jacobson 2013). And the GOP has now lost the popular vote in five of the last six presidential elections. Many political scientists continue to believe that these results should send strong signals to party leaders (and, indeed, to many GOP voters and affiliated interest groups) about the need to move toward the center. In short, they should foster a Downsian correction.

Yet there is absolutely no sign of anything like this happening. It did not happen after the devastating 2008 election, and it has not happened after the 2012 election (despite the fact that the GOP lost ground in the House and Senate as well as losing the White House yet again). In both cases, the party moved rightward rather than moderating.

It is not that the incentives associated with a Downsian corrective do not exist. The problem is that that they are far weaker sources of pressure on the

GOP than political scientists have assumed, for two main reasons. The first is that the “electoral price” exacted when a party moves further away from the center may (reasonably) be perceived as modest. Research in political science has recently identified a range of factors that militate against any automatic process through which voters detect and punish extremism:

- Voters are often only dimly aware of the policy positions and legislative actions of politicians, and politicians can do many things to diminish what awareness they have (Bawn et al. 2012 call this “the electoral blind spot”).
- Voters often have a hard time distinguishing more moderate candidates from more extreme ones (Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2013). The mainstream media’s “horse-race” orientation and its strong incentive to maintain an appearance of neutrality often make it unwilling to describe one party or candidate as more extreme than the other.
- Voters make decisions on the basis of factors (such as the very recent performance of the economy) that are unrelated to the policy stances of politicians (Bartels 2008; Healy and Lenz 2014).
- There are signs that voters may be (increasingly) willing to support the candidate perceived to be on “their” team rather than the one whose policy positions are closer to their own.
- Extremism may produce political effects (e.g., dysfunction, poor economic performance) that voters will attribute to the party of the president, rather than the party producing the dysfunction.
- Less easy to verify but probably quite important, the GOP may benefit if intensifying gridlock contributes to voter alienation and negative views of Washington. Unless dysfunction is clearly attributable to a particular set of politicians affiliated with the GOP, it generally hurts the party associated with an active use for government (that is, Democrats).<sup>5</sup>
- Given the intensity of the base, extremism may generate compensating support (in money, endorsements, or enthusiasm) that offsets any potential lost ground among moderates (Theriault 2013).

All of these factors suggest that, although GOP moves away from the center may pose some electoral risk to the party, we should not exaggerate those risks nor suggest that they operate on Republicans in exactly the same way they operate on Democrats. *As Republicans move from the center, we should picture a gradual slope of modestly declining electoral performance rather than an abrupt plunge into the political abyss.*

<sup>5</sup> This insight was Newt Gingrich’s fundamental contribution to American politics.

The second reason why the penalty for extremism is limited is that the typical Downsian formulation sees the mobilization of centrist, countervailing forces as far too automatic. Instead, moderation may require the emergence of a reasonably cohesive center-of-the-road faction that can impose discipline on more extreme members. In principle, these (relative) moderates should often have the greatest incentive to push back against extremists. They are the ones most likely to be in swing districts and thus the ones most likely to pay a price for asymmetric polarization. Moreover, the status of moderates as “pivotal” voters between the two main blocs potentially gives them considerable leverage.

Historically, the leverage that moderates gain from their decisive position has often played a crucial disciplining role, ranging from the Progressive revolt against Speaker Cannon to the pivotal status of Southern Democrats during and after the New Deal (Katznelson 2013). More recently, the rise of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in the 1980s and 1990s provides a textbook illustration of a Downsian corrective. Animated by widespread concerns about Democratic electability, the DLC was strongly backed by business groups that wanted a more centrist party. The moderate formula espoused by the group was a striking political success. After 1990, most of the leading figures in the Democratic Party (Clinton, Gore, Lieberman, Gephardt, Reid, Daschle, Bayh, and many more) were affiliated with the DLC.

Needless to say, this is not occurring in the GOP. The task of organizing a durable party faction raises formidable collective action problems and entails serious political risks (Rubin 2013). In contrast to the case of the DLC, the balance of organized political forces within the GOP (Christian conservatives, the Tea Party and, at least until very recently, the most politicized elements of the business community such as the Chamber of Commerce) have proved highly unfavorable to moderate organization.

Given all this, extremism may be individually rational even if it is costly for the party; that is, damaging to its brand and its prospects for winning overall majorities as well as presidential elections.<sup>6</sup> Even the price to the party may be limited because of the factors just mentioned.<sup>7</sup> In contemporary politics,

<sup>6</sup> In addition, Downsian analyses, which make reelection the *sine qua non* of politics, may understate the willingness of politicians to accept a level of electoral vulnerability. Professional politicians are increasingly connected to (and often recruited by) organized networks. This probably strengthens their attachment to (potentially extreme) policy agendas. And the development of strong, well-financed networks of “intense policy demanders” may create substantial private benefits for reliable politicians.

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, because much of the GOP policy agenda relates to constraints on government activism, the policy costs of failing to win majorities may be smaller in a context where a minority party may be able to engage in obstruction (the filibuster) and constitutional hardball (e.g., debt-ceiling hostage-taking).

how closely a party adheres to the preferences of the median voter may have a surprisingly modest impact on its political prospects.

In our view, it is the combination of a strong, intense, and well-organized base and a weak organizational base for moderate groups that distinguishes the GOP and makes it more prone to extremism. The “electoral blind spot” resulting from the limited capacity of most voters to identify the sources and nature of extremism creates *opportunities*. It is the balance of organized forces within each party (along with the asymmetric opportunity structures facing the pro- and antigovernment parties) that primarily explains why the GOP, and not the Democrats, have most aggressively exploited those opportunities.

### SOLUTIONS FOR ASYMMETRIC POLARIZATION

This section begins with two basic implications of the previous analysis for the development of reform proposals. The first is a cautionary lesson. At a minimum, proposals based on the idea that polarization is largely symmetrical need to be “stress-tested” to consider the implications if that premise turns out to be false. It is not just that these reforms might turn out to be ineffective – they might also turn out to be counterproductive.

For instance, many advocate reform of the Electoral College’s winner-take-all structure (e.g., by awarding electors to the candidate who carries each congressional district) as a way to make majoritarian outcomes more likely or increase incentives for party candidates to seek support in states (potentially making them more “purple”) that they might be tempted to write off. But if one party is more inclined to play constitutional hardball, such a proposal might be attractive in states where that party controls the legislature and has gerrymandered congressional districts, but expects to lose the popular vote in presidential elections. If this dynamic played out, a plausible reform initiative could be hijacked to reinforce extremism.<sup>8</sup> In all cases, we need to consider the extent to which the effectiveness of reform proposals rests on a particular understanding of the forces generating and sustaining polarization. “Stress-testing” means asking what the consequences of the reform would be if that understanding is seriously flawed.

The second implication is that we need to complement our thinking about the reform of formal rules with greater attention to the social-structural roots of our current dysfunction. Political scientists are excellent at thinking through

<sup>8</sup> Following the 2012 election Republicans gave serious consideration to such proposals in several swing states carried by Obama but governed by Republicans (Wilson 2012).

the first-order consequences of formal rule structures; they are less good at thinking about social structures. When we think of symmetrical polarization, we tend to focus on questions such as “Does rule X create incentives for greater moderation among political candidates?” When we think about asymmetric polarization, however, we are considering contexts in which the same set of rules produces different effects in the two parties. In these contexts, we need to think systematically about the impact of *interactions between rules and the distinctive coalitional structures of the two major parties*. Given the particular set of incentives existing within the increasingly off-center and confrontational GOP, what reforms might increase the benefits of moderation or the costs of extremism?

Here, we outline three types of reforms that might be helpful. These are necessarily just brief sketches, in part because of the priority placed on delineating the mechanisms involved in asymmetric polarization, and in part because they center on influencing (often indirectly) fairly complex political and social interactions that would require much more sustained analysis.

#### *Reestablish Norms of Moderation*

The most alarming feature of asymmetric polarization has been the increasing resort to forms of “constitutional hardball.” These strategies aggressively exploit permissive features of existing institutions (e.g., the appointment process, the filibuster, the debt limit). American political institutions once functioned reasonably well because of widely shared norms that certain things “weren’t done.” Another way to think about this is that actors renounced certain possible strategic moves because they anticipated that the likely repercussions would be too costly. Because these costs appear to have diminished dramatically, a critical reform priority should involve efforts to raise them again. Political actors need to pay a real price for engaging in constitutional hardball.<sup>9</sup>

There is no simple way to raise these costs, but the two critical and interconnected fronts are the media and elite discourse. The media’s contribution to our challenges has been substantial, because in too many crucial venues, the desire to maintain the appearance of neutrality trumps the need for truth-telling. The inevitable complexity of the governing process further increases the temptation to offer narratives that do not help more casual

<sup>9</sup> For evidence that the current crisis over the budget and debt limit reflects strategic choices made by GOP leaders following Obama’s reelection (see Chait 2013).

observers of our politics to determine accountability. This stance enables extremism. The “mainstream” media need to be encouraged to recognize the very high cost of “plague on both their houses” reporting.

An equally important audience for this effort to reestablish norms of permissible political conflict is the elite business community. The immense financial and organizational resources of business leaders make this a crucial constituency in establishing the contours of acceptable debate and behavior. The circumstances under which business elites can play a constructive role in such processes is a large and complex but vitally important subject (Mizruchi 2013). For reasons we explore briefly in a moment, we are not especially optimistic, however, that corporate leaders will emerge as a major brake on GOP extremism.

### *Reduce the Incentives for Obstruction*

One reason asymmetric polarization persists is that obstruction has produced very substantial benefits for the GOP. It has limited the policy victories that Democrats could achieve, even following major electoral victories. Obstruction through the filibuster, as well as by extending weapons of gridlock to previously routine procedures such as appointments and debt limit increases, has given conservatives a new capacity to extract policy concessions even without gaining electoral majorities. This reflects a crucial, underappreciated political reality: gridlock and mounting frustration with government systematically favor the antigovernment party.

Reformers need to think about how to design policy initiatives and institutional reforms in such a way that the adoption of extreme policy positions and an unwillingness to compromise do not systematically benefit obstructionists. Recent reforms of the filibuster are a limited step in this direction. Additional changes, which might preserve some protections for intense minority interests while preventing the wholesale resort to obstruction, would also be helpful.

Another idea with potential is to craft agreements containing “reversion points” that put pressure on or isolate conservative extremists by increasing the costs of failure to reach a broad consensus on policy reforms. This was, of course, the intent of the sequester proposal agreed to by the Obama administration and congressional Republicans in 2011. The agreement failed in practice (revealingly, because it underestimated the intensity of GOP preferences regarding tax increases). Nonetheless, the concept is built on a political logic that holds some promise.

*Strengthen the Forces of Moderation within the GOP*

A telling feature of contemporary politics is the virtual absence of serious organized effort among GOP moderates, whether in or out of office, over the last two decades (Kabaservice 2012). If modern American government needs a capacity for bipartisanship to function – and it does – then we need the Republican equivalent of the DLC.

No single, direct initiative is likely to bring this about. Instead, it is likely to require a number of developments that shift the cost-benefit calculations of some subset of ambitious Republican politicians. Progress on either or both of the first two reform items described earlier would help. So, arguably, would some changes in formal rules (related to elections and campaign finance) that strengthen the electoral prospects of moderates.

As we have stressed, however, asymmetric polarization stems not simply from rules but also from the interaction of those rules with changes in social structure. Over the last generation, social transformations have created a large and intense Republican base, reinforced by well-resourced organizations and an extremist media. Some now hold out hope that the business community will emerge as a moderating force. Indeed, the development of such pressures over time would likely made a considerable difference, as they did in nurturing the Democratic Leadership Council. Yet although the emergence of such organized action in the GOP would matter, we are not optimistic about the prospects. We should not forget that large business organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce have been a principal factor encouraging the GOP's long rightward march (Hacker and Pierson 2010). The wealthy Americans who finance such organizations have benefited enormously from the GOP's increasingly aggressive stance on taxes, government spending, and deregulation, as well as from the GOP's embrace of gridlock as an essential tool for constraining government activism (Bonica, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2013).

Still, efforts to consider what might shift these underlying social coalitions in ways that disrupt asymmetric polarization at least have the merit of asking the right questions. Finding solutions to our current challenges requires recognition that the two parties are not mirror images and they are not equally responsible for rising polarization. The interaction between the electoral base and organizational environment of the GOP creates much stronger incentives for extremism than exist within the contemporary Democratic Party. To effectively tackle polarization, we must recognize this basic difference and tailor our proposals accordingly.

## References

- Ahler, Doug, Citrin, Jack and Lenz, Gabe. 2013. "Do Open Primaries Help Moderate Candidates? An Experimental Test of the 2012 Primary." Working Paper.
- Bartels, Larry. 2008. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bawn, Kathleen, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. 2012. "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 10(3): 571–597.
- Bonica, Adam, Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2013. "Why Hasn't Democracy Slowed Rising Inequality?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27(3): 103–124.
- Chait, Jonathan. 2013. "The House GOP's Legislative Strike." Retrieved from <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2013/09/house-gops-legislative-strike.html>.
- Fiorina, Morris. 2005. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. New York: Longman.
- Hacker, Jacob, and Paul Pierson. 2005. *Off-Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 2010. "Winner-Take-All Politics: Public Policy, Political Organization, and the Precipitous Rise of Top Incomes in the United States." *Politics and Society* 38(2): 152–204.
- Hare, Christopher, Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2012. "Polarization is Real and Asymmetric." *Project Voteview Blog*, May 16, 2012. Retrieved from <http://voteview.com/blog/?p=494>.
- Healy, Andrew, and Gabriel Lenz. 2014. "Substituting the End for the Whole: Why Voters Respond Primarily to the Election-Year Economy." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(1): 31–47.
- Jacobson, Gary. 2013. "The Economy and Partisanship in the 2012 Presidential and Congressional Elections." *Political Science Quarterly* 128(1): 1–38.
- Kabaservice, Geoffrey. 2012. *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Katznelson, Ira. 2013. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. New York: Norton.
- Liptak, Adam. 2010. "Court under Roberts Is Most Conservative in Decades." *New York Times*, July 24.
- Lizza, Ryan. 2013. "Where the GOP Suicide Caucus Lives." *New Yorker*. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2013/09/meadows-boehner-defund-obamacare-suicide-caucus-geography.html>.
- Mann, Thomas, and Ornstein, Norman. 2012. *It's Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Mizruchi, Mark. 2013. *The Fracturing of the American Corporate Elite*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rubin, Ruth Bloch. 2013. "Organizing for Insurgency: Intra-Party Organization and the Development of the House Insurgency, 1908–1910." *Studies in American Political Development* 27(2): 86–110.

- Shor, Boris. 2013. "Asymmetric Polarization in State Legislatures? Yes and No." Retrieved from <http://americanlegislatures.com/2013/07/29/partisan-polarization-in-state-legislatures>.
- Theriault, Sean. 2013. *The Gingrich Senators*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tushnet, Mark. 2004. "Constitutional Hardball." *John Marshall Law Review* 37: 523.
- Wilson, Reid. 2012. "The GOP's Electoral College Scheme." *National Journal Online*. Retrieved from [www.nationaljournal.com/columns/on-the-trail/the-gop-s-electoral-college-scheme-20121217](http://www.nationaljournal.com/columns/on-the-trail/the-gop-s-electoral-college-scheme-20121217).