

Sinclair, Barbara. *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policy Making*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), pp. 448. \$34.95 ISBN: 0-8061-3756-8 hc; \$19.95 ISBN: 0-8061-3779-7 pb

**In this book political scientist Barbara Sinclair** examines how the ideological gulf now separating the two major parties developed and how today's intense partisan competition affects the political process, lawmaking and national policy.

She notes the atmosphere in contemporary Washington is intensely partisan and highly conflictual. Congressional Republicans are more uniformly conservative and Democrats more uniformly moderate and liberal than at any time during the past half century; the result is that most important policy and political fights pit most Democrats against more Republicans. Combine that with narrow margins of party control, and the result is highly polarized and often highly charged and even antagonistic, politics.

Sinclair provides the reader numerous historical as well as current examples to emphasize the material. For example, former Speaker Sam Rayburn used to instruct new members on his prescription for success: to get along, go along. Fast forward to the 1990s, the cocoon of good feeling had been replaced by overt partisan hostility. How did the congressional parties of the Rayburn-McCormack-Albert era – the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s – become over the course of one generation, less than three decades, the congressional parties of Newt Gingrich and Tom DeLay?

If the congressional parties of the 1990s and early twenty-first century are internally more homogeneous ideologically and also ideologically more distant from each other than they were thirty years ago, why did this happen?

Her explanation is a story in which voters, political activists, and politicians all play significant roles. In the first four chapters she traces the development of partisan polarization. She examines its roots in the electorate and in the activist core of the Republican Party. House members' responses to polarization have altered the way in which the House functions and have thereby amplified the effects of polarization, she concludes. Realignment in the South and increased partisan polarization at the voter level contribute to voters becoming more likely to see important differences between the parties. She describes how the Republican Party moved right, how evangelical Christians flooded into the Republican Party, as well as the role played by neoconservatives, the development of conservative infrastructures, and think tanks.

Is the extreme partisan polarization and the hostility between Democrats and Republicans that we see in Congress entirely a result of external factors, that is, of changes in voters and activists? These external factors, she argues, make possible and were a necessary condition for some of the internal changes discussed in the House and Senate. She also contends that internal changes have shaped and amplified the effect of external factors and have had consequences of their own for how Congress makes law.

Most of the book focuses on the changes in Congress and much of this is a story of the Democratic Party, which was after all the majority party in the House almost continuously from 1930 to 1994. She continues the story with the evolution of a confrontationist opposition, the Republican House, from collaboration to confrontation. What have been the consequences of partisan polarization for the policy process? And how and why have the consequences differed in the House and Senate? Her description, in great detail of the new lawmaking process, is the most interesting section(s) of the book.

Political parties in the House today - Members of the House, she argues, desire reelection, good public policy, and influence in the chamber. When members' reelection needs and personal policy preferences are similar within the party and differ substantially between parties, as is the case today, it makes sense for members to organize

their parties and endow their leaders with the resources necessary to facilitate the achievement of members' goals. The contemporary parties are elaborately organized in the House so as to facilitate joint action toward collective goals while also providing members with much-prized opportunities to participate in the legislative process; rank-and-file members' participation is thus channeled largely through their parties and takes forms that benefit rather than endanger their efforts.

Unorthodox lawmaking in the hyperpartisan House now is the norm. Special rules and new floor procedures have been institutionalized. The external political environment of the Senate is essentially the same as that of the House, but those external forces impinge on a body with very different basic rules. She shows, the individualist Senate, a body in which senators aggressively exploited the great prerogatives the rules gave them to further their own individual ends. Sinclair then examines how partisan polarization affects the politics and the process of lawmaking in a chamber with nonmajoritarian rules and with members accustomed to exploiting those rules fully. What has been the impact of partisan polarization on the relationship between the president and Congress in the policy-making process? Does the president do better or worse at getting bills in a form he likes from Congress when congressional partisanship is high or low? What has been the effect of increasing partisan polarization on whether the president and Congress agree?

The Congressional parties, she argues, have also reacted strategically to their transformed political environment; they have adjusted their behavior so as to try and take advantage of new opportunities the altered environment presents and so as to cope with problems it creates. Strategic responses include the following: 1) a concerted effort by the congressional opposition party to compete with the president in agenda setting; 2) more emphasis by the congressional parties on PR politics, that is on attempts to influence the opinions of attentive publics and sometimes the broader public so as to advantage one's electoral and policy goals; and 3) the use of Senate prerogatives by the minority party to try to seize floor agenda control from the majority, and their use by both the majority and minority, to make the Senate floor a forum for PR politics.

From fluid coalitions to armed camps, not only have elected politicians in Congress and the presidency, political activists, and to a

considerable extent ordinary voters polarized along partisan lines, but so have other key political actors. Interest groups and the media are increasingly firmly aligned with one or the other of the major parties and, in many cases, are functioning as full-fledged members of one of the two party "teams." Sinclair elaborates about how these developments have altered the politics of the policy-making process.

In the remaining chapters, she asks a series of still broader questions about how and why our politics have changed: what has been the impact of partisan polarization on the relationship between the president and Congress in the policy-making process? Have the president and the congressional parties responded strategically to the changed political environment, and if so, how and with what effect? How has the Washington political world of interest groups, policy experts, and the news media changed as a response to the hardening of partisanship, and with what consequences? To what extent and in what ways should we worry about the consequences of partisan polarization and is there anything we can do about them?

Sinclair concludes the book with an even broader overview of the political environment. A half century ago, a group of eminent political scientists decried the then current state of affairs. In a report titled "Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System," they called for parties that "are able to bring forth programs to which they commit themselves and . . . possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs." Responsible parties, they argued, are the essence of a well-functioning democracy. Political parties seem to meet the requirements of responsible parties as defined by these scholars to a greater extent today than at any time in the past half century. Yet, the contemporary assessment of the parties and of the partisan that characterized them is far from sanguine. Partisan polarization evokes near-apocalyptic hand-wringing from most commentators and many scholars she notes.

To what extent and in what ways should we worry about the consequences of partisan polarization, and is there anything we can do about them? The contemporary political parties do stand for something and do offer citizens a choice, as responsible-parties advocates argue parties in a well-functioning democracy should do. If you agree that politics in a democracy should be about something real and important, the parties that are ideologically polarized are not altogether a bad thing she concludes.

Extremely relevant in the current political climate, *Party Wars* puts all the parts together to provide the impact of polarization on national politics, pinpointing the good, the bad and the ugly. It is Volume 10 in The Julian J. Rothbaum Distinguished Lecture Series at The University of Oklahoma. This is a highly readable text which students of Public Policy, the Congress, American Institutions and American History would all benefit from greatly.

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