

Critical Dialogue

Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America.

By Hans Noel. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 242p.
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— Russell Muirhead, Dartmouth College

Partisanship in the U.S today is *ideological*, and perhaps no book of the moment can better help us understand the nature of ideological partisanship today than this one. Most grasp that over the past 40 years, the Democratic Party has become uniformly liberal, and the Republican Party conservative. What is less well understood, and what Hans Noel illuminates, is that the ideologies came first. Liberalism and conservatism as we presently know them were only codified in the 20th century—not by partisans but by writers and intellectuals—what Noel calls, in a non-pejorative manner, “ideologues” (p. 22). The soul of the Democratic Party is not to be found in Jefferson or Jackson, but in Herbert Croly, whose *Promise of American Life* (1909) marked the beginning of an effort to define what we now understand to be “liberalism.” And the soul of the Republican Party is located less in Abraham Lincoln than in William Buckley, whose *National Review* hammered out what contemporary conservatism means.

Noel’s argument corrects the common tendency to cast ideology as the slave of political ambition. In Anthony Downs’ model, for instance, “parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies” (*An Economic Theory of Democracy*, 1957, p. 28). Concrete interests, not ideas, seem to matter most in politics, both for both politicians (who want the power, prestige, and income that come from holding office) and voters (who want policies that favor benefits like good jobs, good roads, good schools and such). Yet this no longer quite makes sense of American politics, Noel shows. Ideas matter in a more direct way because those who care about ideas most—the intellectuals or ideologues—have captured American parties.

Through a masterful study of the issue-stands taken by writers for major political publications between 1850 and 1990, Noel reveals how even in the late nineteenth century (when parties were strong and polarized) partisans were not very ideological (pp. 93–118, 82). Nor does ideology make sense of political opinion in the Progressive Era, in Noel’s analysis (pp. 84–88). And parties in the mid 20th century were ideological blends, as each tried “more or

less successfully to spread over the whole political rainbow from on extreme to the other” (E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government*, quoted at 13). The familiar ideologies of liberalism and conservatism only came together as systems of thought in the twentieth century, after which intellectuals and ideologues set about imposing them on the party system (p. 9, 78–82, 122–137, 142, 173).

This leads to the diagnostic question at the heart of the book’s conclusion: is ideological partisanship good? Noel challenges normative democratic theorists to speak to this question more powerfully than they generally have. Indeed, the question of ideology seems to fall into the empty space that separates empirical political science and normative political theory. As I just noted, the economic strain of political science assumes ideology is not a genuine political force in the world. For office-seekers, it is a “means of getting votes”—a tool they use to assure voters they will not deviate from their promises; for voters, it is also a tool they use to economize in assessing rival candidates. But ideological policy convictions are not the real stuff of politics, in this view, since “rational men are not interested in policies per se, but in their own utility incomes” (Downs, *An Economic Theory*, p. 42). Meanwhile, what matters for many normative political theorists is not scoping out the proper place of ideological conflict in a vital democratic system, but settling the ideological question. The task of political theory, for many, is to get at the right or true ideology, to ascertain the most reasonable conception of justice that, if generally accepted, would reduce or eliminate ideological conflict. Yet, as Noel says, since ideological partisanship is not going away anytime soon, we ought to have theoretical resources that allowed us to assess its place in a well-functioning democracy.

For his part, Noel is understandably concerned about a democracy where “activists and politically sophisticated people get what they want” but everyday citizens are disconnected from political elites (Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics*, 2009). Ordinary citizens do not share the ideological convictions that animate activists, candidates, and officials. With an ideologue, we can predict his position on issues B, C, and D, by knowing his view on issue A. The views of ordinary citizens (even highly informed citizens), meanwhile, are seldom constrained this way (p. 40, 68–69). A situation where

political elites impose ideological conflict on the polity, “is at odds with the story we like to tell about democracy.” The electoral connection is meant to empower citizens to transmit their views to political elites, not to transmit ideologies from elites to citizens (p. 181).

But there is a subtle ambivalence to Noel’s assessment, as if he might respect some of the work ideologues do. He suggests in places that it might be misleading to suppose that ideologues have high jacked American politics to their own ends. Ideological differences may reflect real differences of interest, psychological temperaments, and philosophies of government. “We are born,” Noel says, “to disagree” (p. 186).

This ambivalence reflects an ambiguity in ideological partisanship itself. Ideology, Noel says, is a “shared set of policy preferences” (p. 14). The ambiguity comes from the tension between something that is “shared,” and something that constitutes a “set.” To share something suggests a coalition that stands together. A “set” implies a number of discrete items that logically or philosophically belong together.

Ideology, as Noel sees it, involves both of these things. Ideologues, he observes, “are typically trying to reach what they think is a correct answer” (p. 51). As such, ideology is an effort to logically apply principles to “issues of the day,” and thus to construct a logically coherent bundle of issue-stands (p. 42). Yet the ideologies of liberalism and conservatism are not simply political philosophical systems. As Noel observes, intellectuals can exercise great creativity in constructing arguments that link different issues together, and it often seems there is no logical necessity linking issue A with issues B, C, and D. There is no necessity that compels one who opposed the Iraq War to favor of redistributive social welfare policies and the legal permissibility of abortion, for instance. Those positions are bundled together not by logic but by politics. In this respect, ideologies are coalitions, not coherent philosophies: they unite a group that is more likely to be effective when it stands together than would be the case if policy demanders on each separate issue stood alone (p. 7, 13, 19–23, 70).

As coalition-builders, ideologues create the reasons that persuade various conflicting or mutually indifferent policy demanders to stand together and to act together. In this way, they are not different in kind from partisans. Both seek to build a coalition that is sufficiently large and enduring to rule legitimately, consistent with the rules of constitutional democracy. The difference is that the old partisans perhaps cared more exclusively about the spoils of office rather than policy, where for the new ideologue-partisan, policy matters a great deal. But both share the same ambition: they want to rule.

But both the old partisans, concerned mainly with material benefits, and the new ideological partisans, want to rule legitimately: they try to create a majority sufficient to command the House, the Senate, the presidency, and appointments to the Court. This is a daunting task, requiring a majority that is both geographically extensive

and temporally enduring. Neither party and neither ideology has succeeded at the task for nearly 50 years. To suppose that today’s ideological partisans are simply betraying the public by imposing ideologies on a public that is centrist and pragmatic is to believe that there is a path to political success that both parties reject, captured as they have been by ideologues. To be sure, this is not a claim that Noel makes—but it is a commonplace view among those who wish to cleanse politics of ideological disagreement. And it raises a critical empirical question: is there such a majority out there in the country, waiting to be represented?

There may not be such a majority, betrayed by today’s ideological partisans. The coalitions that ideologues and partisans (they are, as Noel shows, now the same people) are trying to build are not simply coalitions of intellectuals and professional “policy-demanders.” They are also building coalitions of citizens. The difficulty of their task may be compounded by the way public opinion is infinitely fragmented across an array of issues, and includes individuals whose ‘centrism’ consists of a combination of extreme positions taken from both sides of the ideological spectrum. It includes others who combine issues in ways that are very challenging to sustain in practice (such as support for expanded entitlements combined with support for tax cuts). If this is right, then ideological partisans do not simply impose their views on the public; they rather attempt to refine and organize public views so as to create what is not in fact already there: a constitutional majority.

This is the creative work both office-seekers and ideologues, partisans all, undertake: they try to persuade people who care about different issues to stand together. The fragmentation that liberty nourishes—the variety of conflicting interests that arise under conditions of commercial freedom, the ways of life that flourish under conditions of intellectual and religious freedom—make the creative work of partisans exceedingly difficult. Neither party in American politics has succeeded in recent decades (the failure of one is more obvious than the other at the moment), and it may be that neither party will truly succeed for as far as the eye can see. If neither succeeds, political elites will need to relearn the brute political skill of compromise in order for the government to govern. Insofar as our ideologies are not only internally coherent political philosophies, but are also, as Noel shows, compromise coalitions, this should be more possible than very recent political history would suggest.

Response to Russel Muirhead’s review of *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*

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— Hans Noel

In reviewing *The Promise of Parties*, I noted that Muirhead had contributed meaningfully to the project of providing

better normative theoretical grounding for political parties. In reviewing *Political Ideologies and Political Parties*, Muirhead begins to do the same for ideologically organized parties.

Muirhead notes an ambiguity in my showing concern for the outsized influence of ideologues while at the same time respecting their often divisive work. This is no accident. Muirhead is right to criticize the commonplace view “that today’s ideological partisans are simply betraying the public by imposing ideologies on a public that is centrist and pragmatic.” For one, so-called moderates are not necessarily centrist nor pragmatic as much as ideologically inconsistent. More importantly, however, there is little reason to believe that some convex combination of polarized elites is somehow more right or just than any position at the poles. Ideologues may not be right, but they are at least trying.

This sets up another ambiguity, between “the task of political theory, for many, . . . to get at the right or true ideology, to ascertain the most reasonable conception of justice” and its task to describe normatively desirable institutions of governance. We have and must have normative views on good public policy itself as well as normative views on the procedures of policymaking, irrespective of the goodness of their product. But these questions are in tension with one another.

The answer to the procedural question usually involves a lot of democracy. But the menu of democratic institutions is long. Some will empower ideologues more than others. Some will empower compromise. It is hard not to judge these procedures by their outcomes. If one thinks certain rights are important, one might sneak them in to the very definition of democracy. If one thinks certain freedoms are important, one might limit the power of democracy to infringe on them.

And in the abstract, why not? We do think certain rights and certain freedoms are important. A just society is not merely a democratic one, but one with many values, and reason is not neutral on which of those values is best. Ideologues can be champions of those values.

But only if those ideologues are thoughtful.

In reviewing *Promise*, I argued that we want ideologues who are also partisans. Here I think we want ideologues who are also political theorists. Muirhead observes that I show that ideologies are not coherent philosophies but compromise coalitions, and they are. But they are compromise coalitions crafted by people who are at least attracted to the idea of coherent philosophies.

The veneer of philosophy is not enough, of course. Recent scholarship on ideology in the mass public suggests that progressivism and conservatism provide many voters with little more than a social identity. And that is not going to change. But the best way into politics for the normative work on the substantive

questions has to be through ideology. And the normative work on the procedural questions perhaps should account for that.

The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age. By Russell Muirhead. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 336p. \$35.00.
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— Hans Noel, *Georgetown University*

In the concluding chapter of my book on parties and ideologies, I call for normative political theory to engage more with political parties. It seemed natural to ask whether the ideologically distinct parties I had described were good or bad for democratic governance. That, in turn, requires a robust vision for what kinds of parties are themselves good or bad for that end.

Sadly, normative theory usually has little to say about parties, ideologically polarized or otherwise. If we believe E.E. Schattschneider’s claim that “modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties,” then political theory spends a great deal of time talking about something other than modern democracy (*Party Government*, 1942).

Russell Muirhead’s *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* is a welcome exception. Muirhead makes the case that citizens and politicians motivated by their partisanship need not be a threat to democracy. Rather than asking them to bridge their partisan differences, Muirhead acknowledges that they differ over something real. Good democracy should be bolstered by those partisan differences, rather than trying to circumvent them.

Muirhead’s normative argument is a very good match for my empirical argument. I argue that ideologies like liberalism and conservatism inherently evolve as political thinkers engage with political issues. They can and do evolve independently of party coalitions. But since party activists are the most likely to adapt ideological beliefs, party coalitions will tend to reflect them. Today, the liberal and conservative ideologies have each become the core philosophy of one of the two parties.

Central to this argument is a distinction between party and ideology. Ideologies are about ends, particularly policy ends. Parties are about means, at least insofar as they view winning elections as a means to the end of implementing policy.

The move to distinguish party from ideology is not one that Muirhead makes, but I think it is in the spirit of his argument. We are in a “polarized age” because parties are also ideological. Both pieces matter. The distinction highlights and perhaps clarifies two important contributions of Muirhead’s book.

First, the distinction helps to characterize the three kinds of partisans that Muirhead introduces early in the book: The power seeker, the moral purist and the zealot.

The power seeker is someone who uses the party for their own career goals. They care not at all about ideology. The zealot cares too much. The moral purist cares about their ideology, but they also recognized limits.

This distinction is important, because the argument is not that any partisanship is good. It is rather that we need to cultivate the right kinds of partisanship.

The moral purist is meant to be more admirable, but the distinction between the purist and the zealot was not always clear to me. Muirhead writes “The political purist becomes a zealot when he comes to believe . . . that there is no justifiable impediment to bringing [his] righteousness to the world” (p. 48). But it is not always clear what kinds of impediments are justified.

In describing the zealot, Muirhead notes that modern ideology is no “fully worked out system of social thought” (p. 51). I also argue that ideology is the result of an always flawed and still-incomplete attempt to work out such a system, but we need to accept ideology as having such limitations. All ideologies are, especially to their detractors, potentially wrongheaded. But we have them. So merely being ideological cannot be the problem, exactly.

Separating ideology from party suggests to me a way of describing the right kind of partisan, which I will call the practical purist. The practical purist accepts one specific impediment to bringing righteousness to the world—the need to win. If you can’t get a majority to at least acquiesce to your goals, you need to temper your goals.

In other words, the practical purist values both their ideology as well as their party.

An ideological party must build a coalition that is sometimes, maybe even often, consistent with the ideology, but also which compromises to bring in new members. Ideologies themselves have schisms, which could lead ideologues to let internecine combat undermine partisan combat. Strategic ideologues, on the other hand, spend time trying to find common ground with their potential allies. This is the work done at *The New Republic* in especially the first half of the last century and at the *National Review* in especially the second half.

This idea is captured in what is my favorite line in Muirhead’s book: “Almost all partisanship is a compromise—not always with rival partisans, but always with our fellow partisans” (p. 18). Non-partisans who are unwilling to vote for a party because they don’t agree with it on every issue are exactly the sort who fail to understand that parties are coalitions.

Ted Kennedy, whom Muirhead praises as “a partisan, in the best sense” is praiseworthy precisely because he both “knew how to get power and keep it,” but was also “principled, and no one was ever in doubt that liberalism oriented everything Kennedy thought” (53).

If the best partisans balance ideology and party, then the modern age is a good one to be in. In the 1960s, scholars (e.g. Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky,

Presidential Elections: Strategies and Structures of American Politics, 1968) described the contrast between purists and pragmatists among party activists. In recent decades, it is not merely that purists are on the rise, but that more and more activists appear to be both.

When parties do not have an ideology at their core, they are built on patronage or temporary logrolls. They can too easily be just about power. And when ideologies are not tempered by partisan practicality, they lead to zealotry. What we want, then, are ideologically oriented parties.

The second area in which the distinction between ideology and party helps is in thinking about institutional design. Both Muirhead’s book and mine often take institutions as given, but we might explore how to bend them to better accommodate parties, especially ideological ones.

Muirhead’s discussions of institutions tend to compare non-partisan forms with partisan forms, finding the non-partisan forms lacking. For example, with nominations, he compares the non-partisan candidate selection with primaries and caucuses for partisan candidacies. But among partisan forms, there is a great deal of variation. If we want to best harness partisanship, we need better institutions.

Completely off the table, today, is the option of no primaries at all. But what sort of partisan primaries should we have? Should we have caucuses? Should a party be able to restrict participation in a primary to those who have shown loyalty to it? My own sense is that we want institutions that foster a vigorous debate within the party, but that are not necessarily susceptible to capture by a small but committed faction. But a party that is invulnerable to change from within is just as problematic.

In *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (2008), my coauthors and I showed that party leaders have been, with several important exceptions, largely successful in shepherding through their preferred candidate, which in most cases were pragmatic purists who were broadly acceptable to the party.

But the institutions party leaders are using are not the best tools for those goals, perhaps explaining why party leaders sometimes fail.

We want the nomination process to balance policy goals with electability. In a world of ideologically defined parties, we want to balance the purity of ideology with the practicality of party. The 2016 presidential nomination process in both parties has invoked the tension between zealotry vs. power seeking.

It is not clear to me that primaries, especially sequential primaries with a multicandidate field, are remotely good at helping parties find moral purists or pragmatic purists.

After 2016, I think we can expect both parties to at least talk about how they should improve their nominations processes. I fear that both will end up focusing too much on how to make the system “more democratic,” rather than

making more suited to serve party democracy. Perhaps party leaders should read *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* before they get started.

Response to Hans Noel's review of *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*

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— Russell Muirhead

Noel's distinction between ideology and party illuminates the ideal of partisanship that I describe and defend in *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*. As Noel shows, the ideal of partisanship that I defend is a balance of partisan loyalty and ideological commitment. This balance resists power partisanship untethered to any convictions on the one hand, and, on the other, zealotry fueled by dogmatic ideological convictions. I defend this balance as a certain kind of ideal of democratic citizenship—one that expresses not only standing *for* one's convictions about the common good, but also a willingness to stand *with* others.

In *The Promise of Party*, I was more concerned about elevating the claims of partisan loyalty and demoting the claims of ideological conviction because I perceived the balance of party and ideology in both contemporary American politics and in normative democratic theory to favor ideology. Political theory, after all, focuses on political ideas: there is sometimes an expectation in political theory that if we get our reasons and ideas right, the rest will automatically fall into place. And the centrality of ideological conviction in the polarized politics of the moment is obvious. Looking back at my book with the advantage of Noel's observations, I think I was trying to restore a balance of party and ideology by elevating the claims of partisanship. So I tried to explain why party loyalty might be an admirable quality among citizens, how partisans might avoid confirmation bias by admitting "bad facts," and how the spirit of compromise is at the core of partisanship. I hoped to describe a partisanship that is less dogmatic without depriving it of ideological conviction.

In his review of my book, Noel tackles the central normative question of American politics at the moment: can ideological partisanship be a healthy feature of constitutional democracy? He and I agree, I think, that it can be. In principle, ideological parties give citizens a chance to debate different ideas about the common good, and allow citizens to give direction to their government. A balance of ideology (standing *for*) and party (standing *with*) is a more compelling ideal for democratic politics than patronage parties that stand for nothing more than rewarding friends and harming enemies, and is certainly better than a polarized politics of self-sure zealots arrayed against each other.

In practice, however, ideological conviction too easily slides into uncompromising zealotry that seeks to win the whole truth for the political world. Ideological parties are vulnerable to capture by a minority of the like-minded who succeed at imposing their agenda on the party (and sever its connection to the broader citizenry). To meet these challenges, as Noel argues, we need more than ideals: for ideals to get real, they have to be connected to political institutions.

Noel is right to focus on the party nomination process as the central site where ideals of partisanship are realized. In *The Promise of Party*, I tried to excavate the logic of the "closed partisan primary," where only citizens registered with a party can vote in that party's primary. I called this a "lost logic," since it no longer makes sense to many. This is the respect in which ideals matter: among the impediments to designing institutions that sustain a balance of ideology and party is the Progressive Era ideal of a non-partisan politics of informed citizens whose common sense is guided by specialized experts. The current difficulties that partisans experience in exercising authority over the presidential nomination process—most acute in the Republican Party—suggests that in addition to thinking about institutional design, we need as well to attend to the place of party and partisanship in our ideals of democratic citizenship.