

# Critical Dialogue

**Party Polarization in America: The War Over Two Social Contracts.** By B. Dan Wood and Soren Jordan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 388p. \$120.00 cloth.  
doi:10.1017/S1537592718001652

— Sam Rosenfeld, *Colgate University*

The epigraph to B. Dan Wood and Soren Jordan's provocative and original book quotes Gouverneur Morris at the Constitutional Convention decrying the idea of treating the propertyless as "faithful Guardians of liberty" through enfranchisement. Four decades later, the authors report, an elderly John Adams echoed Morris in a speech opposing the repeal of property requirements for suffrage in Massachusetts: "[I]f it were left to mere numbers, those who have no property would vote us out of our houses" (p. 16). Such patrician hostility to mass democracy by the Founders, though hardly news, is bracing to behold—but what does it have to do with party polarization, this book's ostensible subject? Everything, it turns out.

The Federalist outlook on democracy's danger to property undergirded an enduring political agenda dedicated to shoring up elites' wealth and power. It also provoked continual opposition on behalf of a "plebian" counteragenda of redistributive economic policies. Such class conflict over the fruits of government policy, according to Wood and Jordan, has not only provided the master story to much of American political history from the Founding to the present. It has also determined the dynamics of party polarization throughout that time.

The unusual structure of *Party Polarization in America* comes close to constituting two distinct books in one. Four historical chapters provide a sweeping synthetic history of economic policy in the United States since the Founding, while two further chapters employ innovative formal and quantitative research to assess the nature and dynamics of our contemporary era of polarization. The book's key arguments are, nonetheless, straightforward and cohesive. Contemporary alarmism to the contrary, party polarization is no novel phenomenon but more like the default condition of American politics; the real historical aberration is the depolarized midcentury period from the 1930s to the 1970s. Contemporary polarization at the mass level is real, while both mass and elite-level polarization is asymmetrically pronounced among Republicans compared to Democrats. And finally, class-based economic

conflict—more than cultural issues or identity—has driven party polarization dating back to the eighteenth century. Forget the hoary truisms about America's individualist political culture and uniquely nonideological party politics. Class warfare and party polarization, the authors argue, are actually as American as apple pie.

The book concludes with a welcome call for future research that would "consider party polarization as a system-wide process" while widening the historical scope of inquiry (p. 312). If such attention to history is one of the book's core strengths, however, its particular outlook on how institutions and processes do (or do not) change over time is also what introduces difficulties.

For all of the book's rich historical detail, the authors make clear that their story is one of cyclical dynamics following a continuous, normal state. Party polarization, to them, is "an empirical regularity" (p. 304) across American history that has waxed and waned at different times due to consistent factors—namely, "the magnitude of class dissatisfaction" and the behavior of "party entrepreneurs" (p. 313)—and by more or less consistent mechanisms. Parties as organizations, and the nature of political conflict between and within them, are treated similarly in the Early Republic, the Gilded Age, the postwar era, and the twenty-first century.

Such flattening raises as many questions as it answers. Parties as organizations have, in fact, looked and operated differently across eras, from the elite cadres of the Founding Era, to the patchworks of patronage-fueled, locally rooted, mass-mobilizing organizations of the nineteenth-century party period, to the permeable and nationalized networks of issue-driven groups and professional operatives in the twenty-first. Has such variation affected the processes by which class conflict has or has not generated party polarization? The extent to which ideology—the constraint rendering positions consistent across issues—shapes the divide between the parties has also, arguably, changed over time. Wood and Jordan describe the historical ebbs and flows of party polarization as, empirically, "a times series random walk" (p. 4). By contrast, Hans Noel's research on the construction of political ideologies suggests that a "unidimensional" left-right ideological divide developed over two centuries, as disparate issue positions came slowly to cohere into two distinct ideological clusters. This process happened

gradually and fitfully, but consistently in one direction, rather than in a random walk. Such historical changes in both the parties as organizations and the role of ideology as a basis of political conflict help shed light on what may be meaningfully *new* about our current era.

As Wood and Jordan show, contemporary rates of polarization in Congress mark a return to those seen at the turn of the last century. But Gilded Age and early Progressive Era polarization featured no comparable government shutdowns, constitutional crises, or widespread worries about partisan animosities tearing apart the social fabric. The book's historical account vividly details how industrialization produced violent class conflict and the emergence of new demands for the regulation of business and the redistribution of resources. But that class conflict and emergent agenda were not neatly reflected in the party system. Bourbon Democrats like Grover Cleveland joined Republicans on monetary and labor policy, important early legislative ventures like the Interstate Commerce Act and Sherman Antitrust Act passed with bipartisan support, and Progressivism ultimately animated major factions within both parties. As work by historians and political scientists alike has suggested, the disciplined voting behavior of politicians in that era reflected the competition between two mighty patronage networks over control of public office and access to the distributive policies of economic development more than it did either a class-based war over redistribution or a battle of clashing ideologies.

Once such ideologies did begin to emerge over the course of the twentieth century, they cross-cut rather than reinforced existing party divisions. That, more than a deep or widespread political consensus about the New Deal social contract, is arguably what accounts for the aberrant party depolarization of the midcentury era. In my own work, I have tried to track the institutional changes and strategic pursuits of key actors that ultimately served to render the parties more permeable to ideological activism and, thus, more reflective of the key ideological divisions in American politics. Contemporary polarization, in which ideological zeal drives rather than mitigates party discipline and procedural brinkmanship, might represent something new under the sun, after all.

Arguably as provocative as the book's case for the deep continuity of party polarization in American history is its insistence that political economy and class conflict, not a "culture war," have always defined and driven that polarization. Starting with a forceful reaffirmation of Charles Beard's class-based analysis of the constitutional Founding, the authors proceed to retell American political history as a perpetual battle between plebians and patricians over governmental largesse. Given a public conversation saturated with angst over culture clashes and political "tribalism," Wood and Jordan's account provides an invaluable reminder of the enduring centrality of

who-gets-what questions to American policymaking and political conflict.

It is sometimes difficult, however, to be sure *for whom* the authors think economic conflict has mattered and for what reasons those issues should be considered primary in accounting for party polarization. A generation of political historians cataloged the pronounced importance of ethno-cultural ties, identities, and commitments in shaping mass electoral behavior during the nineteenth-century party period. And the politics of race and civil rights, along with the rise to salience of new cultural issues in the 1960s and 1970s, played obviously important roles in the story of partisan realignment and repolarization in the later twentieth century. Wood and Jordan acknowledge this, but they portray such issues in the post-1960s context largely as electoral bait used by "Old Guard Republicans" to win votes in the service of a restoration of the pre-New Deal elitist economic agenda. That implies an approach that defines the important axes of conflict in American politics largely in terms of the behavior of political elites and officials making public policy. Such an outlook is eminently defensible, but would have benefited from explicit discussion.

Even limiting the focus to elite cleavages, moreover, still leaves unexplained the one case in American history of political polarization prompting constitutional breakdown and violent conflict: the Civil War. Wood and Jordan exclude from their account an analysis of that conflict and its origins, on the grounds that "polarization over slavery was not about party polarization" (p. 5). But their own grand theory of party polarization is not rooted in an argument about the particular dynamics of parties as such; it is a story of conflict in society manifesting itself in conflict within the political system. The theoretical justification for excluding the Civil War from that story is not obvious. The force of their historical account suffers as a result of sidelining the messy but essential politics of race throughout the centuries, which has been so central to defining who is included in the class of people on behalf of whom the authors' plebian advocates have waged their war with the patricians.

The political ascension of Donald Trump encapsulates many of these themes. Along with his racially charged and nationalist appeals, Trump on the campaign trail espoused a number of plebian economic positions—protecting entitlements, taxing hedge fund managers, plowing money into infrastructure. Such positions were not accidents. While Wood and Jordan convincingly demonstrate significant movement to the right on economic issues among many cue-taking Republican voters, the GOP base remains divided on economics, leaving a receptive audience for Trump's heterodoxy. The actual policy record of GOP governance under Trump, by contrast, has proved anything but heterodox, moving uniformly in a radically regressive

direction. So far, Trump in office has served loyally as a patricians' populist.

The bait and switch ironically recalls the Founders' old arguments against popular suffrage. Common people become "the dupes of pretended patriots," Wood and Jordan quote Elbridge Gerry in 1787, "daily misled into the most baneful measures and opinions, by the false reports circulated by designing men" (p. 213). Is the reader mistaken in detecting from the authors a hint of rueful agreement with this sentiment?

### Response to Sam Rosenfeld's review of *Party Polarization in America: The War Over Two Social Contracts*

doi:10.1017/S1537592718001962

— B. Dan Wood and Soren Jordan

Sam Rosenfeld offers insightful evaluations of our book. He accurately notes that we view party polarization as a discontinuous process, increasing and decreasing through time as a function of elite/mass dissatisfaction (largely economic) and the ability of entrepreneurial elites to mobilize that dissatisfaction. Change in party polarization has always involved partisan warfare over who benefits from government, economic elites or the broader citizenry. Further, contemporary party polarization is not an aberration, but a norm of American politics.

Rosenfeld contrasts our work with that of Hans Noel (*Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*, 2013), who studies elite ideologies and their convergence with partisanship. Noel argues that for most of American political history, there was little relationship between elite ideology and partisanship. He finds that by the 1950s, however the foundations for convergence were in place, marking the potential for contemporary polarization.

As with our work, Noel argues that the impetus for change originated with elites. However, we show that elites were driving partisan behavior as far back as 1794, and during the Progressive Era. We also show that elite ideology for Democrats converged sharply well before 1950, starting with the New Deal. In contrast, post-New Deal Republican ideology was incoherent until the late 1970s. More generally, we argue that the dominant basis for party ideologies through time has been economic, rather than based on the many issues considered by Noel.

Rosenfeld also argues that polarization in previous eras was unlike contemporary polarization. We respectfully disagree. The Founding Era saw vigorous challenges to the Federalist regime, with civil uprisings like the Whiskey Rebellion, and Madison and Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party sparking Jacobin and Democratic-Republican societies that even physically threatened President Washington and members of his administration. In his farewell address, Washington noted

the fragility and instability of the new system due to partisanship (*Party Polarization*, pp. 39–42).

Regarding the Progressive Era, Rosenfeld appropriately notes our discussion and data on civil unrest and violence from the Cleveland through Wilson administrations. However, he then alludes to Cleveland as a Bourbon Democrat, and consensual passage of the Interstate Commerce and Sherman Acts in 1887 and 1890 as countering our argument. However, Cleveland had become more liberal by 1888, evidenced by his 1888 State of the Union remarks (*ibid.*, pp. 56–58). Cleveland supported lower tariffs, increased worker protections, and more vigorous antitrust regulation. By the 1896 election, the two parties had strongly diverged along economic lines, with Democrats subsuming the demands of the Peoples and Free Silver Parties advocating removal from the Gold Standard; lower tariffs; a progressive income tax; nationalization of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones; an eight-hour workday; an end to child labor; and governmental support for unions (pp. 56–58, 69–75). These measures were vigorously opposed by "stand-patter" Republicans.

Finally, Rosenfeld questions our exclusion of the Civil War period from the analysis of party polarization. We state the reason for this exclusion in Chapter 1 (pp. 5–6). To repeat, *Party Polarization in America* is about party polarization. The Civil War did not involve party polarization, with both Democrats and Whigs supporting and opposing abolition.

### The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era.

By Sam Rosenfeld. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 336p.

\$30.00 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S1537592718001974

— B. Dan Wood, *Texas A&M University*

— Soren Jordan, *Auburn University*

Academics, especially political scientists, have provided a wide range of empirical evidence of increased polarization (particularly among elites) in American politics. Our own work outlines this polarization against the entire backdrop of American history, but what has been missing from recent political science work has been a focus on micro-level mechanisms operating in the modern era. Belying the great quantity of empirical evidence is a black box of "elites" that have polarized over time. What we do not see, or observe, or have evidence for is exactly the process by which these elites (and which ones particularly, if any) have systematically driven the two parties toward their currently polarized ideologies.

Sam Rosenfeld fills this gap by providing a detailed account of these micro-level processes. Using a vast array of archival sources, he documents how polarization is largely the result of the initiative of a few key individuals

wishing to instill national ideological unity in the parties in the face of competing pressures for local constituencies.

Rosenfeld begins with what E. E. Shattschneider described as the goal of moving political thinking away from the issue-oriented Progressive approach (with an emphasis on independence from parties) toward using parties as vehicles for making policy that reflected ideological priorities (p. 14). Comparing this vision to the decentralized, ideologically overlapping party organizations of the 1950s, Shattschneider's work culminated in the oft-mentioned American Political Science Association report *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System* (1950). The report formally outlined the case for a pair of responsible parties with distinct, cohesive, ideological visions that give voters competing alternatives.

Such intellectual ambition needed to be matched by practical efforts within the parties themselves, however. As Rosenfeld's narrative moves through the 1950s and into the 1960s, he demonstrates how the confluence of civil rights as a cross-cutting issue (p. 46) combined with internal goals for realignment among a subset of party insiders (p. 62) and led to a unique opportunity to reshape the political parties. This transitioned politics away from a system reflecting the midcentury values of collegiality, compromise, deference, and bipartisanship (p. 42), where, according to Thomas E. Dewey, "the resemblance of the parties [is] the very heart of the strength of the American political system" (p. 64), to one in which parties could begin to diverge and adopt unique positions, especially as *issues* became places where parties could gain electoral benefits (p. 126).

Rosenfeld demonstrates the myriad of organizations required to bring life to such an ideological vision. He documents the growth in the Democratic Party of the Democratic Advisory Council (p. 35), the Students for a Democratic Society (p. 95), and finally the Socialist Party (p. 224), with each move bringing Democrats closer to an ideological alignment away from centrist policies and toward a unified liberal party position. For their part, Republicans grew even more strategic in their infrastructure, establishing the Local Elections Campaign Division (p. 201) and other offices to coordinate electoral efforts around the surging party brand. In fact, each party's best creations (of ideological unity through interest groups like the Americans for Democratic Action, or the previously mentioned electoral infrastructure) were often mirrored by the opposition, creating a pair of parties driven by the other's ingenuity and process.

Over time, this drive for ideological cohesion, matched by the other party, culminates in an "additive, multidimensional contemporary polarization" (p. 281), where parties have increasing incentives to take distinct positions across all issues, not just a subset of them. This is reminiscent of Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey's world of "conflict extension," where parties

take polarizing positions across a variety of issues without allowing conflict to dissipate on prior issues ("Party Polarization and 'Conflict Extension' in the American Electorate," *American Journal of Political Science* 46(4), 2002).

Rosenfeld's archival work here is revealing. We get an in-depth look at the individuals who create extraparty organizations (like the Democratic Advisory Council, p. 35), a reading of competing political approaches to regional party differences (p. 70), the individual architects of ideological party positions in the 1970s (p. 97), even a tracking of the convention-level conflicts that shaped the trajectory of presidential nominations throughout the 1970s. The tapestry he weaves is particularly rich; he pulls direct quotations from a myriad of primary material to help buttress the overall lineage of polarization. It is also particularly attractive, as no data exist to test such a micro-level theory over time, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Gallup and other surveys ask the rare question about ideology (which the author notes as well), but evidence on the ideology of the mass public in these years is notoriously scant. And similar survey evidence on the ideology of elites in the party organization is nonexistent.

We offer a few ways in which this work might be improved and extended. Rosenfeld might more clearly delineate the key political entrepreneurs or moments in his timeline. The very breadth of the historical work makes it difficult to discern key moments or figures on the path to polarization. Put differently, it is clear that the figures he outlines in the two parties played *some* role in polarization, but it is difficult to discern precisely who played a *crucial* role.

The second is a consideration of the *events* as well as *people* involved in this process. Our own work demonstrates the importance of exogenous shocks (like the Great Depression and the 1970s stagflation) in creating opportunities for entrepreneurs to mold and shape the ideological direction of the parties. While Rosenfeld places a remarkable amount of attention on individuals, he pushes events and circumstances to the margins. But they deserve our attention, as only the confluence of circumstances and entrepreneurs leads to polarization.

Our third suggestion is for the inclusion of a more thoughtful consideration of the cast of characters in the modern age (regarding maintenance of brand, depolarization). Rosenfeld offers an intense portrait of the "black box" of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, but relatively few modern characters are outlined. This is important as we try to chart the ideological trajectory of the modern parties. For example, our own work suggests outsized roles for Milton Friedman, Paul Weyrich, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, and others. Further, our recently published work (B. Dan Wood and Soren Jordan, "Presidents and Polarization of the American Electorate," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 48(2) 2018) suggests that presidents in

general have been very important to the polarization of the American electorate. In other words, “polarization” is an idea of distinct and cohesive parties in opposition, but in and of itself it does not determine or define the positions the parties take; political entrepreneurs do.

This bleeds into a more general criticism: We walk away from the book with relatively little understanding of exactly what the parties are aiming toward. Both Republicans and Democrats are described as working toward becoming programmatic parties that deliver on a set of ideologically cohesive party positions. But we fail to get a strong sense of what those positions are, outside of “liberal” and “conservative.” Rosenfeld devotes quite a bit of time to the importance of civil rights and the “social issue” (p. 126) in providing *the opportunity* to form polarized parties, but once parties form as a result of the issues, there is relatively less time and space devoted to the party endgame. To be sure, he notes the various coalitions inside of the Democratic Party (p. 259), and describes the Republican focus on taxes and economics (p. 207). But having so thoroughly detailed the importance of individuals with ideological vision for the creation of polarized parties, it would have been doubly interesting to hear the ultimate ideological vision that these individuals had for their respective parties.

Lastly, Rosenfeld gives quite the bleak outlook for polarization moving forward. Noting the march toward ideological conflict that the parties have undergone in the preceding 50 years, he writes that “the plausibility of new actors being able to effectively reverse that process, either through force of will or procedural tweaks, seems hard to credit” (p. 283). Yet this seems a potentially mistaken conclusion, as the rest of the work serves to show the value of individual agency, even of specific, single persons, in charting the course of the two parties. Rosenfeld even notes this *in the same sentence*, coming to the conclusion that we just quoted after noting “this book’s emphasis on the agency of historical actors” (p. 283). Why is this agency only limited to the past? Can entrepreneurial members of today’s parties not also look at the contemporary landscape—unpopular Congress, executives, politicians—and find room to capitalize on the opportunity to win electoral victories by making the party less ideological and confrontational? Can exogenous shocks not move parties back toward a state of depolarization? Is not party polarization a dynamic process that rises and falls with the ebb and flow of long-term American history, as has occurred multiple times since 1789?

To be sure, we are not advocating for this movement, or even for a depolarization of the parties. But it certainly seems misleading to suggest that the agency and vision of individuals to chart the course of the parties and to reform their ideological positions is limited to a time when those individuals envision a pair of polarized parties only. To the contrary, that is precisely the contribution of

Rosenfeld’s work: outlining the dream of some politicians, intellectuals, or party officials to have cohesive parties offering distinct alternatives. But some other industrious individuals could just as equally have a dream of midcentury values of collegiality and bipartisanship and work to implement them. So it is worthwhile, but demanding, to reflect on the ideological proclivities of the entrepreneurs who shaped our modern parties. That is exactly what Rosenfeld has accomplished in this volume for an earlier era of American politics.

### Response to B. Dan Wood and Soren Jordan’s review of *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era*

doi:10.1017/S1537592718001986

— Sam Rosenfeld

Scholars live for the kind of careful and constructive engagement with their work that Dan Wood and Soren Jordan have provided here. In delineating the core analytical task of *The Polarizers*—to identify the actors who carried out the ideological reconstruction of the party system in the later twentieth century and the mechanisms by which they did it—they also point to what gets under-emphasized in such an account. I see activists and organized groups working in sustained fashion across and between elections as the central drivers of party development. The effort to recover the historical lineages and the often thankless labor of such actors, which lays the groundwork for better-known political events, means foregrounding origins more than turning points and the processes of factional struggle more than outcomes in governance.

Such emphases, however, are not intended to suggest that the developmental story I am telling lacks critical junctures. The New Deal instigated not only a new national political cleavage over regulation and social provision, but also the initial forging of a coalitional and ideological alliance for economic and racial liberalism. The Democratic crack-up of 1968 set in motion both a fateful reshuffling of factional power and a reform process with long-term repercussions for both parties. New Right brokerage in the late 1970s secured an alliance of evangelical activists and the GOP while arming resurgent capital with a potent cultural populism. Such developments rendered the parties permeable to ideological activism and, ultimately, they were sorted and polarized by it.

What about the prospects for depolarization anytime soon? As Wood and Jordan note, my skepticism on this question exists in tension with my insistence on the capacity of historical actors to remake party politics through deliberate action. Although I hardly think we have reached an “end of history” for the party system, I emphasize skepticism for a few reasons. Macro

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developments in the polity make a retreat from programmatically defined parties unlikely. The long unwinding of the nineteenth-century model of party organization and the rise of an expansive national state help ensure that issue-based and ideological motivations will continue to drive those comprising the activist strata of American politics. That makes me dubious of reforms intended to force substantively sorted parties to find common ground and compromise, along with those aiming to close the parties' ideological divisions by targeting by-products like incivility and declining sociability.

If goo-goo reformism will not reduce polarization, realignment driven by the emergence of new cross-cutting issues could. Conflict extension may have defined the last

several decades of party politics, but Trump's capture of the GOP nomination in 2016 while espousing several unorthodox positions offered a reminder of the electoral potential for alternatives to existing party cleavages. The all-too-orthodox Republican policy approach we have seen during Trump's presidency, by contrast, is a reminder that electoral potential only takes us so far toward realignment. The real work, conspicuously absent from the Trumpist tendency thus far, comes from sustained effort by activists, organized groups, and political elites who are willing to work over years and decades to build sufficient intraparty clout to restructure party conflict. The polarizers' story highlights not only the transformative potential of such work but also the difficulty of the undertaking.