

wake up wondering how they will hold government accountable are likely to flip to *Desperate Housewives* or *Monday Night Football*. Increasing media choice allows the politically uninterested to avoid learning about politics. This fact has serious consequences for democracy.

Using an innovative survey experiment, Nielsen research data, and sophisticated treatments of American National Elections Study and other survey data, Prior reports evidence consistent with his “Conditional Political Learning” model, which posits that “*the effect of motivation on political learning depends on the media environment*” (author’s emphasis, p. 33). Analyzing data from the 1930s to 2005, Prior shows that broadcast television’s inception increased the political knowledge and propensity to vote of the less politically interested by limiting their media choices, while the advent of cable allowed fans of entertainment to eschew political information, resulting in news fans making elections more partisan.

Prior’s arguments with respect to political polarization are less convincing as they do not adequately deal with some of the major perspectives on partisan change during the time period he studies. In one example, recently rearticulated by James Stimson, political elites were polarized on the abortion issue before public attitudes on abortion became predictable by partisan identification (*Tides of Consent*, 2004). Moreover, Geoffrey Layman and Thomas Carsey’s many accounts of “conflict extension” in the electorate must be incorporated into explanations of polarization involving the media environment.

Given the focus on entertainment fans and news junkies, it is a bit curious that Prior does not consider the political relevance of some entertainment programs. Indeed, it is challenging to “get” the jokes on *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* if one is not familiar with current events. Thus, some by-product learning may occur, especially for younger segments of the population, who have been able to avoid by-product learning as a result of high media choice.

These are minor quibbles. In the main, Prior’s noteworthy accomplishment is sure to be required reading for scholars and students interested in the media, turnout, political knowledge, and polarization. Both books do an excellent job of moving forward the debates about media concentration, media choice, and democracy and should be widely read.

**Redistricting and Representation: Why Competitive Elections Are Bad for America.** By Thomas L. Brunell. New York: Routledge, 2008. 160p. \$130.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.  
doi:10.1017/S1537592709090422

— Michael H. Crespin, *University of Georgia*

In this provocative and well-written book, Thomas L. Brunell introduces an original thesis: that in order to increase Americans’ satisfaction with Congress, we should draw congressional districts that heavily favor one party or

the other. The reason for this, Brunell argues, is that Americans are more satisfied with their own representatives and Congress as an institution when they are able to vote for the winning candidate. If we wish to maximize voter satisfaction, then the ideal system would work to maximize the percent of the population that has the opportunity to vote for a winner. To achieve this result, we should draw districts with as little ideological diversity as possible.

In the introductory chapter, Brunell begins to discuss why ideologically homogeneous districts produce better representation. If a member of Congress represents an ideologically diverse district, then she can only really be responsive to a portion of that district on any particular vote. For example, imagine a district where half the voters want higher taxes and half want lower taxes. No matter how the member votes, she is going to make half of her district unhappy. Now imagine another district where 80 percent want lower taxes and 20 percent want higher taxes. In this case, the member makes the easy vote for lower taxes and 80 percent of her constituents are happy while only 20 percent are not satisfied with their representation. Brunell thus argues that districts drawn to include only like-minded partisans increase voter satisfaction and make it easier for the representative to gauge the views of her constituents and transfer those views into votes. While these new districts might not be competitive at the general election, the threat of a primary challenge will ensure that members are responsive to their constituents.

In chapter 2, the author uses a Downsian framework to demonstrate that representation will be better (or suffer from less agency loss) in districts with less ideological variance. Heterogeneous, competitive districts, Brunell argues, must have higher variance compared to safe homogeneous seats. Therefore, constituents receive better representation when they reside in homogeneous and uncompetitive districts. This section of the book could be improved by a discussion of sub-constituencies. For example, there may be some issues that are salient for part of the district and other issues that are important to another group in the district. We can draw nice theoretical ideological distributions, but in reality, ideological variance may be more complex.

Next, the author uses survey data to test some of his key assumptions. Here he demonstrates that constituents are actually more satisfied when they vote for the winning candidate and, perhaps more importantly, there is little evidence that satisfaction is linked to competition. Although I find the tests compelling, I question the reliability of the data. According to table 3.1 (p. 36), over 77 percent of the respondents reported voting for the winner. This seems questionably high, even in an era of uncompetitive elections. So, if respondents are not truthful about their vote choices, can we believe what they say about how they rate their representatives? I would also like to see evidence that compares levels of satisfaction experienced

by constituents represented by a member of the majority party in Congress as opposed to a member of the minority party, since this plan would likely lead to one party having a lock on majority status for a minimum of one redistricting cycle.

In the next chapter, Brunell argues that his plan is workable within the current constraints associated with drawing congressional districts. I think this chapter is extremely well written and succinctly summarizes a great deal of the literature on redistricting. In chapter 5, the author explains the benefits to drawing districts according to his plan. He argues that his plan will minimize the number of losers, improve on the accuracy of representation, prevent gerrymanders, decrease the influence of third party candidates, and decrease the probability that an election will be decided based on poorly designed ballots or lawsuits.

In the final substantive chapter, Brunell takes on some of the possible critiques of his proposal. The first critique deals with redistricting and polarization. Brunell argues that “the trend toward polarization is not due to redistricting, and creating even more fully packed districts will not impact polarization” (p. 97). He then tests the argument presented by the media and others who blame increased levels of polarization on the drawing of politically homogeneous districts of the type proposed by his plan. In short, some reformers argue that members elected from safe districts can be more extreme because they have more ideological leeway compared to members elected from more competitive moderate districts. Brunell refutes this thesis by demonstrating that representatives from uncompetitive districts are not necessarily more liberal or conservative than members from competitive districts.

While this may be a valid test of the arguments presented by redistricting reformers, I do not think it offers a direct test of the plan outlined by Brunell in this book. If we are interested in testing how Brunell’s plan would likely influence polarization, looking at the level of competition within districts would seem much less important than simply examining the ideology of members who represent the type of districts that Brunell proposes. Comparing the DW-NOMINATE scores of members from ideologically homogeneous districts with members from heterogeneous districts, it is clear that the members from ideologically homogeneous districts are more extreme than members who represent more heterogeneous districts. Under Brunell’s proposed plan, the heterogeneous districts would become homogeneous and as a consequence, the few moderates left in Congress would likely disappear. As such, it is hard to believe that Brunell’s plan would not lead to even higher levels of political polarization.

Although I thought there were weaknesses in the author’s arguments dealing with polarization, I agree with others made in this chapter. Brunell shows how his plan influences the responsiveness of the electoral system by providing for a more equitable translation of votes into seats. I

find this line of reasoning, along with the call for a symmetric matching of partisan strength, quite compelling.

In conclusion, then, in spite of some of the criticisms discussed in this review, there is a lot to like about this book. It challenges the conventional wisdom that competition is good for democracy and offers an original take on how to reform our electoral system. Brunell presents his argument in a clear and concise fashion and makes it accessible at many levels. I think anyone interested in “fixing Washington” would be well served by reading this book. Although Brunell offers ample evidence in support of his unique thesis, I am not sure if the reformers who currently dominate the editorial pages and think tanks are ready, or brave enough, to implement his plan to increase the satisfaction with our current districting system.

**The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror.** By Alyson M. Cole. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. 256p. \$55.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592709090434

— Anna Kirkland, *University of Michigan*

In *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror*, Alyson Cole explains a wide range of familiar cultural battlegrounds of the 1990s—including political correctness, multiculturalism, identity politics, and date rape—by deconstructing the language of victimhood running beneath them. Political claims to wrongful treatment have been critically recast as “victimism” and presented as evidence of a cultural slide into solipsistic, vengeful weakness. Cole’s study takes topics that many in political science and sociology know exhaustively well (and, indeed, have been exhausted by) and reintroduces them not by revisiting their arguments but by taking stock of their implicit terms and by making them important and interesting again. The book reminds those on the political left why these efforts of the 1990s were so easily mocked: because describing victimization is so often tied to a group identity and because it makes demands on the state for redress. Those roots and remedies are typically regarded as contemptible in a political culture that valorizes “up-by-the-bootstraps” individualism and easily transforms victims into feminized, pathetic schemers. Cole’s ultimate concern is these political effects of the backlash against invoking victim status, which she terms “anti-victimism.” The Cult of True Victimhood referenced in the title is what real victims then must be: only those who deny their victim status, demonstrating propriety, responsibility, individuality, and innocence. The Cult of True Victimhood, Cole argues, “serves to undermine collectivity and depoliticize challenges to injustice” (p. 6).

The book is wide ranging and interdisciplinary, an example of what I would call applied political theory (with none of the status-demoting qualities of the term “applied” meant here). That is, Cole treats non-canonical popular