

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 2: Sources of American Discontent

Asya Magazinnik (Professor)

Zeyu Chris Peng (Teaching Assistant)

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MIT

1. Logistics

2. Class 2 Readings

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, “End Minority Rule”

Ezra Klein, “Why We’re Polarized”

William Howell and Terry Moe, “America’s Antiquated Constitution”

Paul Starr, “The Battle for the Suburbs”

Logistics

1. Recitation scheduling & Chris's office hours

- Please fill out survey by the end of the day to be counted!
- Chris's OH: 4:30-5:30 PM Thursday

2. Next class: reading and response papers

- Finalized readings are on syllabus and uploaded to Canvas (under Files)
- 500-word response papers are now being accepted

Class 2 Readings

1. Identifying a current crisis
2. Stating that this crisis is not new; part of a larger crisis
3. Explaining the roots of the larger crisis
4. Proposing solutions

Four Views on America in Crisis

Author	Immediate crisis	Deeper issue
Levitsky & Ziblatt	Rule of populist minority	Constitutional design + electoral geography
Klein	Toxic partisanship	TBD
Howell & Moe	Dysfunctional government	Outdated constitutional design
Starr [Rodden]	Electoral bias	Urban/rural divide + winner-take-all elections

Class 2 Readings

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, “End Minority Rule”

What Do the Majority of Americans Think?

- Americans who agree that “there’s a lot of discrimination against African-Americans”: 19% in 2013 and 50% in 2020 (Tesler)
 - Driven mainly by changes in the attitudes of white voters
- Americans who believe that the country needs to “continue making changes to give Blacks equal rights with whites”: 46% in 2014 and 61% in 2017 (Pew)
- Voters who believe that “newcomers strengthen American society”: 46% in 2016 and 60% in 2020 (Pew)

What Is the Composition of Government?

- Racial exclusion & immigration restrictionism are prominent features of Trump presidency and Republican party platform
- Currently, razor-thin Democratic majorities in House and Senate (likely to flip in the midterm elections)
 - Republican control of House and Senate (+ the Presidency) in the previous Congress
- 6-3 conservative majority on the Supreme Court

The Constitutional Origins of Minority Rule

Constitutional design favors **small states**:

1. Electoral College upweights small states
2. Senate gives equal representation to all states

This advantage has been amplified over time:

1. Population growth has widened the disparity between “big” and “small” states
2. Partisan alignment along rural/urban divide
 - Democrats are now concentrated in big (urban) states, Republicans in smaller (rural) states

Small State Advantage → Partisan Advantage

Together, these two facts have translated a **small-state** advantage into a **partisan** advantage.

- California, New York, Illinois, and Michigan — all Democratic strongholds — now comprise 25% of the U.S. population and 8% of Senate seats
- Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico are excluded entirely (4 million voters)
- Electoral College amplifies votes of small (Republican) states: Bush (2000) and Trump (2016) won Presidency and lost the popular vote

(Note also the filibuster, another antimajoritarian aspect of constitutional design, which makes it even more of an uphill battle to govern.)

Proposals for Reform

- Ending the Electoral College/electing President by popular vote
- Puerto Rico and D.C. statehood
- Eliminating the filibuster
- Defending and expanding voting rights

Class 2 Readings

Ezra Klein, “Why We’re Polarized”

What Is Partisan Polarization?

In short, how well you can distinguish between the two parties' platforms.

In principle, polarization has some advantages:

- APSA Committee on Political Parties Report (1950) emphasized parties as “indispensable instruments of government” because they “provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternatives of action.”
- Political parties are *shortcuts*: “The act of choosing a party is the act of choosing whom we trust to transform our values into precise policy judgments across the vast range of issues that confront the country.”

What are the downsides of polarization?

“Summarized today, the report can sound like a call for fewer puppies and more skin fungus.”

From “Party Mush” to “Negative Partisanship”

In 1950, “Being a Republican did not mean being a conservative. It meant being a Republican. Party affiliation was a tautology for itself, not a rich signifier of principles and perspective.”

- *“when Gerald Ford ran against Jimmy Carter, only 54 percent of the electorate believed the Republican Party was more conservative than the Democratic Party. Almost 30 percent said there was no ideological difference at all between the two parties.”*
- Ticket-splitting: correlation between Democratic share of the House and the presidential vote went from 0.54 (1980) to 0.65 (1990) to 0.97 (2018).
- Feeling-thermometer rating of out-party: from 45/100 (1980) to 40 (1992) to 38 (1998) to 29 (2016).
- Meanwhile, *positive* partisan attachment is weakening: 80% of voters said they were Democrats or Republicans (1964), vs. 63% in 2012.

So here, then, is the last fifty years of American politics summarized: we became more consistent in the party we vote for not because we came to like our party more — indeed, we've come to like the parties we vote for less — but because we came to dislike the opposing party more. Even as hope and change sputter, fear and loathing proceed.

For why the underlying causes of this transformation, stay tuned...

Class 2 Readings

William Howell and Terry Moe,
“America’s Antiquated Constitution”

Howell and Moe: From Representation to Governance

Even if the nation could somehow free itself from the Electoral College and arrive at a more democratic way of electing its presidents, those presidents would still assume office and inherit a government that is ungovernable.

The American system of government was *designed* for ineffective lawmaking.

- *Legislators are electorally tied to their local jurisdictions and highly responsive to the constituencies and special interests that get them reelected*
- *Congress is not wired to solve national problems in the national interest. It is wired to allow hundreds of parochial legislators to promote their own political welfare through special-interest politics.*

Is there a tension between democracy and governance?

Proposed Solution

Expand the powers of the president, e.g. through “presidential fast-track authority”

- Put president at the center of lawmaking process; place initiative with the president to craft policy proposals
- Congress just votes up/down

Why does the president circumvent the problems of the legislature?

What new problems might Howell and Moe’s proposal introduce, and how do they respond?

- Presidential overreach, oversized government
- Have they overlooked anything?

Class 2 Readings

Paul Starr, “The Battle for the Suburbs”

Problem: Underrepresentation of urban dwellers (Democrats)

- Republicans have won the presidency in the Electoral College twice in the past two decades despite losing the popular vote
- Democrats have won more votes than Republicans in elections for 11/15 Senates since 1990, but they have only held a majority on six occasions

Cause: An increased urban-rural political divide in voting and the use of winner-take-all single-member districts in US legislative elections

- *The urban-rural partisan divide, long a phenomenon in the industrial states, had now become the principal axis of partisan conflict throughout the country.*
- Population density predicts vote choice, partisanship, and stances on social and cultural issues.
- But Democrats are “inefficiently” concentrated in cities for a system of winner-take-all single-member districts.

Proposed Solutions

- Proportional representation
- A center-left Democratic party to appeal to the suburbs?