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What History Teaches about Partisanship and Polarization

Sam Rosenfeld, Colgate University

Everyone says they hate partisanship and political attacks. As a recent Pew survey showed, large majorities of Americans recognize that current politics are marked by discord and believe that it is important for Democrats and Republicans to work together on issues and for the tone of political debate to be respectful. Scholarly and popular books proliferate – to diagnose the pathologies of partisanship, blame them for governmental dysfunction, and even suggest that partisan polarization is undermining democracy itself.

Angst over contemporary hyper-partisanship easily turns into nostalgia for a bygone era of comity and compromise. But this obscures a complicated, and ironic, history. As my new book *The Polarizers* details, more than half a century ago, leading scholars, journalists, and politicians also decried dysfunctions and called for reforms. But ironically those observers identified *excessive bipartisanship* as the central problem in U.S. politics, and called for more polarization. This past debate matters, because understanding problems in the earlier, less partisan-polarized era of mid-twentieth century U.S. politics and the calls of critics for more partisanship can help Americans today better address contemporary democratic dilemmas.

When Bipartisanship Was the Problem

The mid-twentieth century was a period marked by unique levels of bipartisanship in U.S. lawmaking. Although often attributed to an overarching postwar "consensus," such cross-party collaboration is more accurately seen as a byproduct of the huge ideological range contained within the ranks of each of the two overlapping major parties. Because key ideological divides of the period cross-cut rather than reinforced the partisan divide, most lawmaking was carried out via bipartisan coalitions. And congressional deals were forged by powerful committee chairs who were granted key decentralized authority by party leaders. Thanks to seniority rules, those committee chairs were disproportionately longtime incumbents from the uncompetitive one-party South. Norms of civility and across-the-aisle camaraderie made sense in such a system. "Integrity crosses party lines," a Republican told one scholar analyzing Senate mores in the 1950s. "You rely on some of your Democratic colleagues equally."

This mid-century cross-partisan system was strongly criticized, however, by observers who made a democratic case against the fuzzily indistinct parties and argued that bipartisan lawmaking blurred lines of political accountability, making it difficult for voters to know which office-holders to hold responsible in elections. Reforms were pushed most forcefully by a committee of political scientists who called in 1950 for "responsible party government" run by programmatic parties organized around coherent and distinct policy positions rather than ties of tradition, patronage, or personality. They believed America would benefit from a system in which the parties "bring forth programs to which they commit themselves and … possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs."

Architects of Party Polarization

This argument had impact. It informed the actions of activists and reformers on the left and right who worked consciously during the second half of the twentieth century to reshape the parties and their operations around internally cohesive and mutually distinct ideologies.

Early advocates for reform were liberal Democrats frustrated by the obstacles other party members posed to liberal policymaking. They found support from ideological groups, civil rights advocates, and the progressive wing of organized labor. As these activists battled the traditional political machines for state and local control of Democratic organizations in the North, they also attacked the outsized national power of segregationist southerners. Meanwhile, conservative Republicans advocated for a partisan realignment that would unite southern whites and northern Republicans. By the 1960s, Democratic-backed national responses to the civil

rights movement made many southerners amenable to changes, as large numbers of northern Republican transplants were moving South and intellectuals fashioned a national conservative agenda that included opposition to aggressive federal civil rights enforcement.

A wave of institutional reforms in the 1970s provided a new environment for redrawing the lines of ideology and partisanship. Liberals pursued congressional rules changes that empowered party leaders, ended automatic seniority, and made committee chairmanships subject to the vote of the Democratic rank and file. Simultaneously, sweeping reforms of the parties' presidential nominating procedures shifted control away from party actors and toward outside groups and primary election voters. Both sets of reforms rendered the political system more permeable and responsive to ideological activism. Liberal and conservative activists alike channeled the movements and issues emerging from the tumult of the 1960s into new base party coalitions.

From the 1980s on, party adherents sorted out along ideological lines, catalyzing a partisan resurgence that has continued, unabated, into the troubled present.

Coming to Terms with Polarization

This new world seems to fulfill the vision of mid-century responsible party reformers, yet they would likely be just as dissatisfied as today's citizens. It turns out that they underestimated the virulence of party polarization in practice, which can reach toxic levels when team spirit is reinforced by shared worldviews and core social identities. They also failed to anticipate the institutional dysfunctions that would happen when disciplined, programmatic parties tried to operate within America's Madisonian constitutional system laden with "veto points." In this system, minority parliamentary-style parties have incentives to obstruct the legislative process, rather than participate in governing compromises.

The ill "fit" between polarized parties and U.S. governing institutions may have to be rectified by institutional changes – such as getting rid of the Senate's 60-vote requirement to break a filibuster. Of course, ending filibusters is an example of a reform intended to allow partisan majorities to more easily implement their agenda when in power, a change that would accommodate rather than mitigate polarized partisanship. Most Americans resist this kind of accommodation, but the story of the postwar polarizers reveals that there are hard trade-offs between worthy goals in the U.S. system – trade-offs between pragmatic bargaining and coherent policymaking, between clubby elite comity and democratic participation and accountability. A sense of realism about those tradeoffs may be long overdue.

Read more in Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).