

Polarized America

McCarty, N., Poole, K.T. & Rosenthal, H. (2008). *Polarized America*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 256 pp. \$38

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This book draws attention to polarization in America as a result of fundamental social and economic changes of recent decades. The focus of the book is therefore very much unlike the traditional emphasis on common place arguments of the unbridgeable divide between political ideology and the political geography of red and blue states. While they are cognizant of race and “moral values,” the authors look at income and economic well being as important variables in defining political ideology and voter preferences, partly because of their interest in achieving a correction of an imbalance in political science through the prism of economics. According to McCarty et al (2008):

Income has been largely ignored, and race-ethnicity and class (as measured by occupation rather than income) receive more attention. We chose economics also because many public policies are defined largely in terms of income (p.10).

The authors, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, are all accomplished professors and writers. Nolan McCarty is Susan Dod Brown Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Princeton University with several articles on polarization. Keith Poole is Professor of Political Science at the University of California in San Diego with a varied professional career as visiting Professor of Political Science at California Institute of Technology. He is Kenneth Lay Professor of Political Science, and Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Howard Rosenthal is Professor of Politics at New York University, and like McCarty and Poole, he also has a varied professional career in teaching and publishing. He has published countless journal articles on politics, sociology, and economics since the 1960s, encompassing political ideology in American and French politics, polarization, least squares estimates, game theory, partisan cycles in Congressional elections, and the macroeconomy, political coalitions, and spatial modeling.

In *Polarized America*, the authors present a common interest that is reflective of years of collaborative work and a passion for a closer look at the effects of economic vari-

ables on the polarization of American politics.

The book provides a concise definition of polarization as a separation of politics into liberal and conservative terms. This definition provides the structure within which they subsequently discuss the basis of contemporary polarization in America. They first conceptualize the definition within two complementary facets of: (i) individual membership of Congress; and (ii) the widening political divide induced by centrifugal conservative and liberal politics. On both accounts, they record that moderation diminishes, but they also highlight a growing attempt to conflate conservative and liberal politics with *Republican* and *Democrat* labels.

In an interesting choreography of political events, the authors provide a comprehensive introduction to the book in chapter one. This is a crucial chapter for an understanding of the structure of the book and its contents. Readers are introduced to the definition of polarization as it is used in the book, but also to the concept of why polarization has taken place in its contemporary form. They provide two reasons for contemporary polarization: (i) Republicans in the North and South have moved sharply to the right; and (ii) moderate Democrats in the South have been replaced by Republicans.

The book is structured to capture the following: an introduction to the definition and bases of polarization in America; data collecting techniques for estimating polarization; voting behavior of elected officials as evidence of polarization; income-induced political participation of the American electorate; the intensification of polarization as a result of immigration; institutional polarization i.e. polarization in Congress induced by campaign finance; and the effects of polarization on public policy such as taxes and minimum wage. This organization of the book cuts across meaning, behavior, corruption, consequences, and empirical evaluation—a broad range of concepts that are crucial to understanding and explaining polarization in America.

The authors moved away from a reliance on interest group rating to NOMINATE—an improvement in data collection to score politicians directly from their role call voting records—using all of their recorded votes to ascertain who votes with whom and how often. In addition to government sources, such as the US Census Bureau, the authors use surveys to link partisan identification with income, but readers should be reminded that although surveys are a conventional source of information, they lend themselves to validity threats. National election study data and Pew survey data are relied upon to make probabilistic conclusions and inferences.

Data estimation, including regression analysis, constitutes the bulk of the empirical work in this book. The authors do not quite state their preference for estimating their regression models in levels, except of course, one can implicitly assume that the coefficients of the quadratic specifications are linear. These models are standard estimating models that demonstrate probabilistic outcomes. Additionally, the spatial modeling of voting behavior with “cutpoints” between probable extremes is also utilized. Each legislator is assumed to have an *a priori* position (ideal point) on the liberal-conservative spectrum.

To deal with probable errors, the authors admittedly point out that legislators might make mistakes and depart from the ideal or expected state because of pressures from campaign contributors, constituents, convictions or random errors. Using this stochastic model, they estimate the ideal points of legislators from roll call choices made by legislators. But the

success of the one dimensional spatial model is contingent on the proportion of explained votes, which can be inflated by a preponderance of unanimity. This presents an accounting challenge that the authors evaluate against a null model in which legislators vote with the majority to account for a magnitude of error — the Proportional Reduction in Error (PRE).

This book makes a significant contribution to the literature on American political-economy. The book reports that from the 1960s to 2000 inequality rose during a period of increased prosperity. This evidence suggests that the concept of trickle-down economics may not be as tenable or cogent as it was once presented in the 1980s and thereafter.

The book presents an alternative view to the results of the 1950s and 1960s, which envisaged the end of ideology and converging incomes. As such, contrary to substantial opinion, the book reports that the timing of the reversal of inequality predates Reaganomics and it stands in contradistinction to the literary tradition of convergence in the 1950s and 60s exemplified by the work of Bell, *The End of Ideology*, Dahl and Downs.

To the extent that this book is a reflection of earlier published arguments, it seeks to maintain the alternative literary tradition that economic variables are important for understanding polarization in American politics.

Apart from its contribution to the literature, the book has identifiable weaknesses and strengths. The emphasis on a shift of the focus on political polarization from traditional arguments of race and moral values to that of income is particularly interesting. Although the authors did not quite address the issue of race, but preferred to focus on income, they arguably might have conflated race and income because of the extent to which the two are correlated and therefore indistinguishable. The extent of the intended separation in *Polarized America* is therefore not immediately apparent.

The authors show an awareness of the challenges in social science research (threats to validity) by improving on their sampling and estimating techniques. By becoming less reliant on interest groups that select only a small number of roll call votes, the authors improve on their polarization measure and minimize the threats to validity in order to attain some amount of efficiency.

One of the greatest strengths of this book, which can arguably also be a weakness, is the extensive use of data, illustrations, and estimating techniques that are cogently used to justify the argument of polarization. This procedure is evidence of empirical acuity, which might be painful for readers with inadequate empirical training, but who might otherwise be interested in understanding the basis of polarization in America.

By its methodology, this book excites the prospects for further research. This study highlights the need for further research on partisan identification to see whether surveys are well correlated to alternative measures of partisan identification and income. The spatial error correction model is a research technique that can be used for further inquiry into political polarization in America.

The detailed empirical work and plentiful illustrations of this book constitute a foundation for those with a keen interest in empirical and theoretical development, including: the basis of income concentration; the political intensity of ideological divide; measurement of polarization; the effects of polarization on the electorate; and the impact of campaign finance on polarization.

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