

Congress

Lea Booth – Percily Chapter 9

Political Scientist Nolan McCarty in his paper “Reducing Polarization by Making Parties Stronger” argues that strengthening political party structures would decrease polarization.

To this end, he recommends giving political party structures more power to influence primary election candidates, and he advocates increasing the amount of money parties can receive from donors and give to campaigns.

McCarty begins with three theoretical frameworks for how parties and the ideologies of their elected officials interact based on the different strengths of each party. He hypothesizes that stronger parties would decrease polarization because both parties have to appeal to the median voter across districts in order to secure victory. In the strong party scenario, polarization is low since the party has the power to guide its elected officials to the middle. McCarty theorizes that, in political systems with weak parties, the parties do not have the influence to coalesce candidates towards a larger message. Instead, candidates focus only on their districts, and since the candidates focus on individual districts, the resulting party delegations have heterogeneous beliefs, causing low levels of polarization. The final case he considers is the intermediate-strength party. McCarty argues that in this scenario, voters use party labels to make informed choices by identifying ideologies like “conservative” and “liberal” in each party. To cater to these voters, candidates converge towards party ideology, creating homogenous elected bodies. The amount of divergence of this homogeneity depends on how strong the parties are. Extreme candidates create divergence between the parties, so strong parties that can screen out these candidates reduce polarization. Because intermediate parties do not screen consistently, extreme candidates cause the parties to diverge from the center. In summary McCarty argues that weak parties and strong parties reduce polarization, while intermediate parties increase polarization.

McCarty references existing literature and conducts his own experiments regarding party strength and polarization, and his results reinforce these theories. He finds that states with semi-closed primary systems, which represent intermediate party systems, are more polarized than truly open or closed primaries, which represent weak and strong parties, respectively. McCarty also studies campaign finance laws and finds that political systems with less restrictive contribution laws are more polarized. These results support his theory because lax contribution laws allow ideologically driven individuals and interest groups to pull candidates away from the center. To test the final portion of his theory, McCarty looks at how polarization changes based on whether parties get their resources from interest groups or from traditional patronage sources. He conducts a statistical analysis on these effects and finds that states with more traditional party structures, and therefore stronger party structures, are less polarized than those without them.

The polarizing effect of intermediate party systems is why McCarty recommends creating stronger parties through closed primaries and campaign finance reform. These measures would reduce the power of ideologically extreme individuals and organizations to influence candidates and therefore to cause ideological divergence between the parties and would enable the political parties to appeal to the median voter, reducing polarization.

Kelsey Vita – Persily Chapter 10

In Chapter 10 of *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, Persily argues the issue facing American politics today is not political polarization, but political fragmentation. Persily defines political fragmentation as “the external diffusion of political power away from the political parties as a whole and the internal diffusion of power away from political parties as a whole” (Persily 146). Based off of this definition, it appears that Persily attempts to address both partisan polarization and ideological consistency with his solutions; by bridging gaps between different factions of political parties, thus increasing ideological consistency, Persily hopes to reduce partisan polarization among officeholders.

Persily argues that systemic issues such as communications and elections financing “disarm” political party leaders of tools previously used to maintain party discipline and ideological unity (Persily 148), resulting in rogue members who lead further party division. While Persily accepts that polarization may exist for a long time, he proposes three potential solutions: empowering the electorate more directly, changing the assortment of candidates running, and instituting structural changes within political parties. In this summary, I will discuss two methods: changing the assortment of candidates running for office instituting structural change in political party leadership.

Solution 1: Changing the Assortment of Candidates Running for Office Persily argues that an attempt to change the assortment of candidates seeking office with an emphasis on bringing in centrist candidates has the potential to bridge existing partisan divides. He mentions a few well-known possibilities for instituting this, such as increasing the number of open primaries, allowing independent-design commissions to re-district, and reforming legislative rules, but also some lesser-known options, such as repealing laws that prevent primary losers from running as independent candidates or even getting rid of primary elections (Persily 150).

Solution 2: Political Party Structural Changes Persily states that fragmentation makes parties “incapable of functioning,” with an emphasis on the role of communications and electoral finance in political party structure; he believes that in order to combat fragmentation, political party leaders need more power. The ability of more publicly notable representatives to develop their own brand outside of the political party allows them to manage their own fundraising and create their own faction of the political party, detracting from the ability of party leaders to foster a cohesive party message and lowering ideological consistency. Persily labels these firebrand individuals as “independent entrepreneurs” (Persily 152). He acknowledges that it is too late to attempt to roll back the effects of social media on politics, thus turning his attention from communications to campaign finance. In Persily’s ideal solution, electoral financing would be handled publicly through the political party rather than through individual candidates. However, acknowledging that this solution may be unachievable, Persily adds that banning soft money also could reduce the number of rogue party members starting their own party factions.

Sam Burridge – Persily, Chapter 18: Making Deals in Congress

As expected, the solutions presented in Chapter 18: *Making Deals in Congress* primarily address the ideological polarization of America’s political elite. While the literature has devoted much

time to distributive models of Congressional policy negotiation, zero-sum games where one party wins and one loses, the most successful bipartisan policy proposals tend to follow integrative models where both parties win on a proposal by packaging differing policy priorities together: for example, the 2013 Senate immigration bill which doubled border security funding for Republicans while improving paths to citizenship for millions of undocumented residents for Democrats. The solutions discussed in Chapter 18 therefore seek to maximize the number of integrative policy proposals brought forward in Congress.

Of the solutions presented in Chapter 18, two stand out as significantly more feasible to implement than the rest. The first, expertise, involves members of Congress' outreach to research groups neutral and partisan. To craft an integrative proposal that can satisfy multiple, often-opposed interest groups on either side of the aisle and therefore garner support in most of Congress, the first step is to ascertain what exactly the priorities of these interest groups are and how they would be affected by the proposed policy. In the status quo, members of Congress often cite analysis from neutral research groups such as the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Budget Office when it supports their prior conceptions of an issue, since it brings their proposals legitimacy free of partisan bias; otherwise, they ignore these groups. Equally necessary, however, are research groups and think tanks with partisan agendas. These groups often develop policy proposals which reflect the agendas of interest groups ideologically-aligned with them, so listening to them is in effect listening to what the interest groups want from Congress in terms of policy. Encouraging the growth and ideological diversity of these research groups, even despite their biases, will bring a broader number of possible policy proposals to the negotiating table, allowing a larger variety of policy packages which satisfy both parties and increasing the probability of finding integrative proposals that are win-wins for both parties.

The second solution, repeated interactions, is something we're familiar with from our in-class presentations. Just as friends are better collaborators than strangers, the amount of integrative solutions that can be made increases as members of Congress across the aisle develop personal relationships and spend more time with each other. Current Congressional norms have reduced the opportunities for members of Congress to interact with each other outside of work. Some examples include the shorter Congressional work week encouraging living outside of DC and the Congressional softball teams becoming more partisan in their membership. Reversing this trend would help develop more Congressional friendships, which leads directly to integrative solutions. Chapter 18 quotes former Senator Chris Dodd (D-Connecticut) who noted that on every legislative success he "always had a Republican partner, every time." These win-win integrative solutions built upon Congressional personal relationships foster bipartisanship and the depolarization of Congress.

Claudia Chen – Persily 19: Helping Congress Negotiate

In this chapter, Mansbridge states that putting negotiation at the core is the solution to our status of immutable elite polarization.

Mansbridge's two characteristics of a successful negotiation are having zero middle ground and having parties acknowledging their differences. Zero middle ground pushes parties to make agreements, and acknowledging their differences facilitates the effectiveness of the agreement.

However, there are two biases that prevent successful negotiations: self-serving bias and fixed-pie bias. Self-serving bias turns us toward optimism, ignoring the zero middle ground and accepting worse deals. Fixed-pie bias locks parties in thinking it is impossible to benefit both parties on different grounds, limiting the “size of the pie”, thus reducing the number of issues that can be solved. To demolish these roadblocks, Mansbridge states that institutions should be familiar with the opposite side’s perspective, allowing both sides to benefit by “enlarging the pie”. Putting negotiation at the core is crucial because by lessening biases, we can decrease sources of human errors.

Mansbridge proposes that successful negotiations require two levels of success. First-level success includes transparency (privacy), repeated interaction, and access to side payments. Privacy allows parties to realize that there are different perspectives and look at their situations critically. Repeated interactions are ensured by long incumbencies, which are achieved by legitimating contested elections. The long incumbencies benefit congressmen as they allow them to build long-term relationships, realizing who is trustworthy and understanding others’ perspectives. The last part of first-level success is access to side payments. The action of bringing a variety of issues to the table, whether beneficial to one’s own party or to others, is called “logrolling”. Logrolling increases the number of issues being discussed and allows both parties to gain joint benefits. Though “logrolling” is not largely favored among taxpayers as it seems like their money is going toward unknown public goods, Congress is able to bring large numbers of issues to the table and “second-level success” ensures that logrolling still contributes toward successful negotiations.

Second-level success is strengthening the trust between constituents and their representatives. Constituents believe their representative’s credibility has largely decreased due to evolving perceptions and how people think about representation. In the near past, there have been two models of selecting representatives: the current dominating sanction model which claims that voters choose representatives that respond to their every demand for fear of not being reelected, and the selection model where voters choose the most politically aligned candidates. The selection model is more beneficial society as candidates are decided based on their everyday lives, reputation, and consistency. Trust facilitated from the selection model is essential because voters will stand by their candidates’ side even with unexpected outcomes of negotiations.

In conclusion, Mansbridge promotes negotiation in Congress as a solution to elite polarization. By putting negotiation to the core, Congress will be ensuring privacy, repeated interaction, access to side payments, and trust between constituents and their representatives, allowing both parties to receive benefits that were previously ignored.