

Electoral Explanations

Jack Buchholz – Persily Chapter 5

In this section, Persily lays out four distinct solutions to the increasing gridlock in Congress caused by polarized elected officials. Before he explains how to best tackle this problem, he emphasizes that these solutions will only partially solve the issue because drastic action is almost impossible to imagine in our current political climate. Below I will summarize how campaign finance and news media reform will alleviate some of the gridlock we see today.

Campaign Finance:

Since *Citizen's United* became law, money has been pumped into elections at an astounding rate. Super PACs have unlimited money to spend supporting candidates, especially those who are ideological pure. Persily proposes that we “fight fire with fire” by spending more to support centrist candidates. (88) He purports that using negative ads to punish ideological extremists will help move the needle back to the middle. Persily also suggests that increased independent spending by party committees will help solve the problem because it will ensure loyalty from the candidate to the party. In the process, parties can get back to focusing on winning majorities, and supporting centrist candidates that they would not have wasted their time on when they had less money to spend. These committees can also allocate money to protect those who have decided to compromise with the other party on things that are essential to keeping the government functional. Lastly, Persily wants the donation limit to candidates to be raised so that they are able to speak for themselves and drown out the more extreme outside influencers. Having more money would allow these candidates to run on things their party would not normally support, which could reduce ideological convergence, and allow for more compromise.

News Media:

The birth of the 24-hour news cycle brought on an onslaught of polarized media. Today it seems like every new source has taken a side, and their positions are steadily diverging. Persily proposes the creation of a new news organization that is devoted to commending mavericks who compromise without qualm, and criticizing partisans whose extreme positions contribute to gridlock. He recognizes that there are already a few outlets who espouse this message, but he says “the challenge is to build an audience of ideologically moderate and politically independent citizens for whom politics is at best a peripheral concern, as well as to attract the selective attention of the more open-minded partisans.” (89) Unfortunately, Persily does not theorize as to where the funding for such an organization would be attained.

Perhaps most importantly, Persily emphasizes that these changes will not have the impact that many expect. He believes that real change will only occur once citizens have finally decided that this level of partisanship is poisonous to democracy. He imagines that the polarized issues that envelope our newsfeed, like ObamaCare and immigration, will eventually be settled. He also believed, when he wrote this book, that the next president will be less divisive than Obama; however, there is still a chance that will be true after Trump.

Stefan Pruessman – Persily Chapter 6: Reform Primaries and Redistricting

One of the proposed solutions to polarization in Chapter 6 (appropriately titled “Solutions to Polarization”) is to set up primaries so that turnout is increased, the goal being to increase moderate participation in primaries (which has been low for some time) and draw candidates closer to the center. Regarding primaries, Persily suggests removing closed primaries (where only registered party members can vote in their primaries) or adopting California’s system (where both parties participate in one primary, and the two candidates with the most votes run in the general election). The goal of both is to encourage moderate to vote and run more. The specific aspect of polarization they are meant to address is ideological divergence, the idea that the platforms of the parties have moved further and further apart; these solutions hope to move them closer together by increasing moderate influence and decreasing partisan influence. He also suggests holding all state primaries on the exact same day of the year, so that media coverage encourages participation across the country (rather than in the early states like New Hampshire and at the cost of late state participation); this again falls under solving ideological divergence by increasing moderate turnout and pulling the parties to the center. Another solution is to reform redistricting. The goal here is to solve reduced dimensionality of conflict (drawing district lines used to be distinct from the party-conflict dimension, but today is a key battleground) by letting independent groups conduct redistricting. Persily makes sure to note that both congressional primaries and redistricting together increase polarization rather than acting in a bubble, and so both kinds of reform should be undertaken in order to be effective.

Taylor Jones – Persily Chapter 7: Income Inequality

The perceived polarization of the United States congress by the mass public is very high. Although the party platforms of the two main opposing parties in the United States, the Democrats and the Republican, are probably no more polarized than other political parties in other nations worldwide, they are perceived by the public view is that they are extremely polarized. This is reinforced by the party leaders of Congress’s inability to **pass** bipartisan policies that both opposing parties are able to support. The two-party system in the United States reinforces party platform ideologies and characteristics that they are rarely viewed as diverging from. The representatives within respective parties tend not to be able to deliver on their particular party’s platforms promises because it requires agreement and complex negotiations with the opposing party. However, members of congress rarely if ever vote for policies of the opposing party due to the increased polarization and control of party leaders. **The inability of congressional leaders’ ability to control of the agenda further reinforced the populations belief that the parties are very polarized.** Although the viewpoint of increased polarization might not be the case, the public’s opinion of particular parties’ platforms have become increasingly polarized. Political parties are now classified with extreme characteristics that rarely tend to sway from. Democrats have been characterized the party of the lower class, while Republicans often stereotyped as being the party of white upper-class suburban. It appears as though heterogeneous areas have been created with very democratic urban area and also a small conservative pocket, which contributes to increasing extreme polarization. There is a decreasing number of moderate members of congress that can mediate between the particular policies that are attempting to be implemented. In addition, after World War II not only have the parties become economically divided, but also geographically divided the Republican party is often

reserved to rural and Suburban area, while the Democratic platform is normally reserved for the Democratic Party. In most recent years, a strong relationship can be seen between population density and Democratic voting. This leads to extreme representatives to appease the pockets of individuals in certain areas. Voters are usually not willing to vote for someone of due to perceived party platforms even if certain liberal members. It is believed that members have sorted themselves in to geographically similar districts. In order to decrease the perceived polarization some presidents have suggested adopting a parliamentary system or a system in which the house and senate align with one another, but would be very difficult to enact. The author suggests that a more realistic solution is the possibility of re-districting. Gerrymandering further increases the impact for polarization by increasing the demographic trend. Another idea was instituting a mandatory voting law that would dilute some of the extremists voting and bring in more centralist voters.