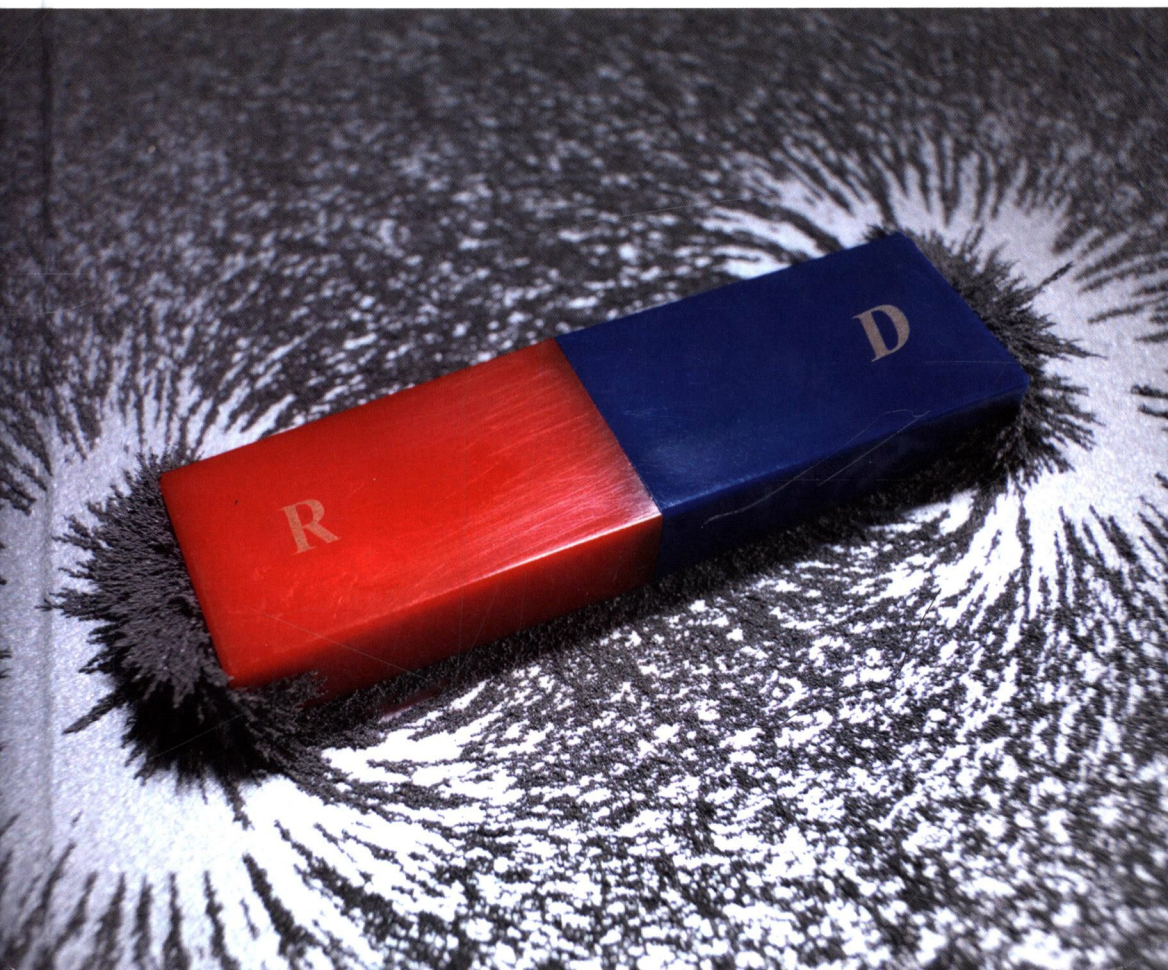


Party Polarization in America

The War Over Two Social Contracts

B. Dan Wood, with Soren Jordan



This book develops a general explanation for party polarization in America from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Prior polarization studies focused exclusively on the modern era, but this work traces party polarization from the constitutional convention of 1787 to the present. Using such a broad historical perspective shows that what was unusual in American history was the period of low polarization from the Great Depression through 1980, rather than the period of high polarization of the modern era. Polarization is the norm of the American system, not the exception, and is likely to persist in the future. More theoretically, party polarization in America has been due to class-based conflict and rent-seeking by the patrician and plebian classes in various historical eras, rather than conflict over cultural values. As in earlier historical eras, modern party polarization has largely been elite-driven, with party entrepreneurs cunningly and strategically using polarization to their advantage.

B. Dan Wood's other books include *Presidential Saber Rattling* (Cambridge, 2012), *The Myth of Presidential Representation* (Cambridge, 2009, and recipient of the Richard Neustadt Award), *The Politics of Economic Leadership* (2007), and *Bureaucratic Dynamics* (1994). He is also a widely cited author of many articles in leading political science journals.

Soren Jordan is an assistant professor at Auburn University. He is also the author (with Kim Quaille Hill and Patricia A. Hurley) of *Representation in Congress: A Unified Theory* (Cambridge, 2015). Prior to coming to Auburn in 2016, he was a postdoctoral research associate in the department of political science at Texas A&M University after earning his Ph.D. there in 2015.

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The War Over Two Social Contracts

B. DAN WOOD

Texas A&M University

with

SOREN JORDAN

Auburn University



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SOREN JORDAN is an assistant professor at Auburn University. His research focuses on lawmaking in Congress, especially how lawmaking strategies have evolved over time as a result of the polarization between the two political parties. His work has appeared in *Social Science Quarterly*, *Research & Politics*, and *The Forum*. He is also the author (with Kim Quaile Hill and Patricia A. Hurley) of *Representation in Congress: A Unified Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). Prior to coming to Auburn in 2016, he was a postdoctoral research associate in the department of political science at Texas A&M University after earning his Ph.D. there in 2015.

At the constitutional convention of 1787, Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania expressed disdain for the “commoner” class, stating, “Give the votes to people who have no property, and they will sell them to the rich . . . We should not confine our attention to the present moment. The time is not distant when this Country will abound with mechanics and manufacturers who will receive their bread from their employers. Will such men be the secure and faithful Guardians of liberty?” (Madison 1787, August 7) His answer was a definitive no.

*This book is dedicated to the ordinary citizens of America,
past, present, and future.*

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book develops a general explanation for party polarization in America from both historical and contemporary perspectives. It also evaluates whether modern polarization is good or bad for the health of American democracy.

Of course, polarization is nothing new in world or American history. In ancient Athens, factional conflict led to the world's first democracy. During the seventh century BCE, the Archons (lords) and Areopagus (a council chosen by powerful noble families) ruled Athens. The great mass of the people served noble families and had no say in government whatsoever. Fearful of the population, the Athenian nobility enlisted King Archon Draco in 621 BCE to codify a new set of laws. "Draco's laws were most notable for their harshness: there was only one penalty prescribed, death, for every crime from murder down to loitering" (Blackwell 2003). By the sixth century BCE, most Athenians had been enslaved to the rich. Selling oneself or family into servitude to pay debts was common; most people had lost their land and become tenant farmers for the wealthy. By 594 BCE, it was clear that class conflict might erupt into rebellion.

Residents of the Athenian city-state were hopelessly split into two factions: wealthy oligarchs and poor democrats. The wealthy wanted to maintain their positions in society. The poor wanted to level the political and economic playing fields. The Athenians chose a new King Archon, Solon, to revise their laws. Solon reshaped political power by granting citizenship to every free resident of Athens and the surrounding area. Athens under Solon had many elements that would later be a part of Athenian democracy – democratic juries, an Assembly, a Council, and selection of most officials by lottery rather than election. The Athenians believed that lotteries were far more egalitarian than elections, because elections always favored the wealthy (Hansen 1999, 84). Solon's laws did not establish Athenian democracy as such, but nevertheless became the template for its development over the next 200 years (Blackwell 2003).

Why is this story worth recounting? Not much has changed over the roughly 2,600 years since the birth of Athenian democracy. World history is replete with struggles between the wealthy and the masses. American history is no exception. The American Constitution was framed in a setting where wealthy property holders were pitted against those who would take their property through popular democracy. The struggle between the American commercial class and those who supported it with wage slavery continued from the early American Republic through the nineteenth century and up to the Great Depression. The same struggle continues today, as the wealthy seek tax advantages, free markets, and a regulatory regime that favors the acquisition and retention of even greater wealth. In contrast, the masses seek to retain advantages gained as a result of New Deal and Great Society reforms.

This book is partially about gaining a historical perspective on the nature and severity of modern party polarization. Citizens, pundits, politicians, and social scientists alike lament the extent of polarization and governmental dysfunction in the modern era. However, focusing on present conditions sidesteps the real reason for studying party polarization: it is an important research concept worthy itself of scientific investigation. History reveals much about party polarization in America. Therefore, this book develops a comparative historical perspective on polarization in earlier eras.

A primary theoretical purpose of this book is to develop a general explanation for why party polarization existed in earlier American historical eras, as well as in recent history. Basically, the book argues that party polarization has always been rooted in class-based economic conflict. Much as in ancient Greece or Rome, a patrician class secured advantage and sought to maintain its advantage. Later, a plebian class obtained advantages of its own, and sought to maintain that advantage. Thus, the struggle for class advantage has been a defining characteristic of American party polarization.

A secondary theoretical purpose of the book is to examine the implications of party polarization for democracy and representation. Some have argued that party elites drive polarization in the American system, rather than the electorate. If so, then that does not suggest effective democratic representation. Further, if elected officials are more polarized than those who elected them, then there may be a representation gap. On the other hand, if elected officials are polarized because the electorate is polarized, then American democracy may be healthy. This book provides an initial effort to determine whether party polarization is healthy for American democracy.

The research reported in this book started in the fall of 2010, with various conference papers delivered from 2011 through 2016. Fellow panelists at these conferences provided useful comments, and their work also informed this work. As with any project of this duration, thanks are owed to many. Jon Bond was very helpful in sharing insights on party polarization in Congress. George Edwards was a reliable sounding board for ideas regarding the presidency. As Director of the American Politics Program, with help from Jon Bond,

Paul Kellstedt, and Joseph Ura, Texas A&M provided financial support through a Strategic Development Grant funding two mini-conferences on polarization, one focusing on American political institutions and the other focusing on the electorate. Participants at the institutional polarization mini-conference included Sean Theriault, Jeff Stonecash, Hans Noel, Laurel Harbridge, Kim Hill, Paul Kellstedt, Jon Bond, and Soren Jordan. Participants at the mini-conference on electoral polarization included Marc Hetherington, Chris Ellis, Jan Leighley, Corwin Smidt, Christina Wolbrecht, Grant Ferguson, Antje Scweinnicke, Rick Lau, Paul Kellstedt, Kim Hill, and Francisco Pedraza. University funds also enabled visits by Keith Poole, Alan Abramowitz, Mike Crespin, Kim Fridkin, and Chris Wlezien. Thanks to all for providing excellent discussions and sharing ongoing research. Insightful suggestions also came from three anonymous reviewers, most of which were implemented in the final manuscript.

A debt of thanks is also owed to those providing research assistance for this project. In particular, Clayton Webb and Kelly Arndt provided invaluable data collection and research support. Clayton is now a faculty member at the University of Kansas, and also team teaches the time series course at the University of Michigan's ICPSR summer methods program. Kelly shows high promise and will soon join the academy.

Robert Dreesen of Cambridge University Press was very helpful in advising on how to pitch the manuscript. He encouraged writing in a style that would be inclusive of readers at all levels. Accordingly, the focus is on theoretical substance, with the most technical materials relegated to appendixes. Hopefully, the materials in this book are not so complex as to deter serious readers. If so, then Robert deserves credit. He was also a pleasure to work with as an editor, especially in securing expert reviewers and facilitating the review and acceptance process.

In the interest of future research, replication is encouraged, as well as further application of the data. Thus, all of the data on party polarization reported in the empirical parts of the book are available at <http://people.tamu.edu/~b-wood/replication.html>.

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