

THE NEW DEBATE OVER PARTY GOVERNMENT

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In recent years, a large number of political scientists have spoken out in dismay against the increasing levels of partisanship in the American political system. Almost universally, the rise of polarized parties is presented as a highly unfortunate, perhaps even disastrous, development for the quality of American democracy. The evolution of a party system where each party is largely wedded to a single ideology (liberalism for the Democrats, conservatism for the Republicans) is seen as the source of many problems. Congress is a snake pit of feuding partisans, where rigid and extreme ideologies prevent democratic deliberation and productive compromise. During the presidency of George W. Bush, Republicans on Capitol Hill allegedly became little more than partisan foot soldiers, slavishly implementing the president's agenda to the detriment of the legislature's traditional function of checking executive power. Civility and mutual respect have largely broken down between partisans, fostering endless disputation even when the parties could reasonably be expected to reach a fruitful compromise. Polarized partisanship has even been blamed for excessive interest group influence and corruption at the highest levels of the congressional Republican party, and among Democrats as well. All in all, the rise of polarized and more disciplined parties – an idea once welcomed by political scientists – is presented as a classic example of the unintended consequences of political action, and confirmation once again of the foolishness of intellectuals and academics who seek to reform political institutions.

The thesis of this paper is that this kind of argumentation, practically the conventional wisdom now in much of the political science discipline, is poorly supported by evidence, and often

value-laden and ideological in character. The evidence that polarized partisanship systematically generates worse policy outcomes than the more ideologically diverse parties of fifty years ago is highly impressionistic, and based on an extremely limited time sample. Because of this, we should consider the jury still out on the effects of polarized partisanship and stronger party discipline on American government. There are, in fact, reasons to think that trends towards stronger and more distinct parties have had a positive impact on American politics, and that the problems of partisanship, insofar as they exist, are better addressed not by embracing dreams of bipartisanship or nonpartisanship, but by seeking *better* and, yes, more *responsible* partisanship. The mid-century project of responsible party government (RPG) is not in need of abandonment, but of *completion*. The path forward is not to attempt to return to a (largely imaginary) world of reasonable cross-partisan deliberation and compromise, but rather to fully embrace the democratic possibilities of the more purified and coherent parties that now define our politics.

The Old Arguments for Responsible Party Government

The current attacks on party government are, of course, just the latest entries in a historic debate over the role of political parties in America that extends back to the nineteenth century. As a result of this give and take, by the middle of the twentieth century the argument for stronger, more responsible parties had reached full maturation. Two publications at this time embodied especially well the arguments in defense of stronger and more distinct parties. The first was E.E. Schattschneider's 1942 book, *Party Government*, which memorably asserted that "the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the

parties.”¹ Schattschneider argued that “party government (party centralization) is the most practicable and feasible solution of the problem of organizing American democracy.” In 1950, the American Political Science Association also endorsed the idea of stronger and more disciplined parties when its Committee on Political Parties released its famous report, *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*. The report claimed: “An effective party system requires, first, that the parties are able to bring forth programs to which they commit themselves and, second, that the parties possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs.”²

All such arguments began with the recognition that the federal government had assumed a much larger role in American life than the framers of the U.S. Constitution could have ever imagined. The government in Washington now regulated in diverse ways virtually the entire economy, and ran large welfare state programs that demanded consistency, dispatch, and coherence. Piecemeal reform, localized benefits, and perpetual stalemate were now more costly than ever. “In the new situation in which they find themselves, the American people need a government which is something more than a punching bag for every special and local interest in the nation,” Schattschneider wrote.³ While a shift towards parliamentary system might solve these problems, constitutional alterations of that magnitude were simply inconceivable in a society so wedded to the existing constitution as a symbol of national identity, and so wary of formal

¹E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2004 edition), p. 1.

²Report of the Committee on Political Parties, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” *American Political Science Review* 3 (1950), p. 1.

³Schattschneider, *Party Government*, p. 209.

concentrations of political power. Fortunately, there was an easier alternative, found in an equally American invention: the political party. Disciplined parties based upon a coherent and clearly-stated program could take control of both the executive and legislative branches and bring about coherent policy change on behalf of a national majority. Schattschneider put the point forcefully: “The function of planning, of integration, and over-all management of public affairs for the protection of the great interests of the nation can be handled only by a strong national party leadership supported by a well-mobilized majority.”⁴ The APSA report agreed that “the crux of public affairs lies in the necessity for more effective formulation of general policies and programs and for better integration of all of the far-flung activities of modern government.”⁵

A key component of this vision was the presentation of distinct choices to the voters. This could only be done if the parties were fairly homogenous internally. If each party presented a distinct program, the public would be presented with substantive choices at the voting booth, and be able to hold the ruling party accountable for the success or failure of government policy. Parties that combined within themselves very diverse – even divergent – ideologies would be unable to present a coherent program to the public. Therefore, it was desirable that each party become oriented around a different ideology, and that constituencies incompatible with that ideology be shedded off (presumably left to join the party where they more logically belonged). Despite this, RPG advocates, including the authors of the APSA report, were at pains to argue that distinct parties did not necessarily mean radically polarized parties. The APSA report

⁴Ibid., p. 208.

⁵Report of the Committee on Political Parties, p. 16.

actually argued that RPG “will not cause the parties to differ more fundamentally or more sharply than they have in the past...Nor is it to be assumed that increasing concern with their programs will cause the parties to erect between themselves an ideological wall. There is no real ideological division in the American electorate, and hence programs of action presented by responsible parties could hardly be expected to reflect or strive toward such division.”⁶ The authors of the report seemed to envision a system of two parties, each a few notches to the left or right of center, but sufficiently apart to allow the public a choice that reflected different values and associated priorities and trade-offs. To achieve this goal, some reshifting of the party coalitions would be necessary, as conservative Democrats were sorted into the Republican party, and liberal Republicans transferred over to the Democrats. The competitive pressures of a two-party system would ensure, however, that both parties would, over a suitable period of time, stay fairly close to the preferences of the median voter.

The creation of more distinct parties, presenting different “alternatives of action” to a discerning public, was *not*, however, the whole of the RPG platform. Rather, the program also included major institutional reform to establish national party organizations that could formulate and interpret a party program, recruit candidates, run campaigns, and, if necessary, enforce sanctions against party members who departed from the official ideology. The most detailed presentation of the reform agenda was in the APSA report. Party organization at the national, state, and local level would have to be strengthened and democratized. Their ambitious plan would make parties far more wealthy, powerful, and centralized than they had ever been before in

⁶Ibid., p. 20.

American history. They proposed to make the national committees smaller and more deliberative, capable of meeting more often and drafting a detailed platform of national policy. The national committees would be buttressed with more staff and resources to promote the party's ideas and candidates. The most novel idea was the creation of a national "party council" composed of fifty members drawn from Congress, the executive branch (when controlled by the party), governors, and the state and national party organization. This elite grouping of leaders from multiple branches and levels of government would set forth the party position on key issues (based on the platform previously approved by the convention), "screen" congressional and presidential candidates, and even oversee and perhaps punish state and local party organizations that strayed too far from national policy. The report suggested that the council might form a smaller committee that would serve as a "party cabinet," perhaps operating much like the shadow cabinets common in parliamentary systems. In order to keep these newly powerful institutions under democratic control, the party would have to define membership explicitly, require dues, and establish clear procedures for the membership to exercise influence over party affairs.

As the parties gained more resources, they would also play a more important role in running campaigns and crafting public appeals. The result would be that campaigns would be less candidate-centered, and more party-centered. The great debates would be over policy and platform, and rarely over character and personality. Because of this, citizens would have a good deal of certainty about what they would get should one party gain control of government. By enriching the content and predictability of the party brand name, and deepening the party's

capacity to deliver on the promises that name implied, intelligent voting would be made far easier for citizens. Accountability and governmental effectiveness would both be enhanced.

The APSA report constituted a comprehensive reform plan that went far beyond a simple purification of each party's ideology and a rationalization of its associated coalition. It was, in fact, a strongly majoritarian vision of how American politics should work, explicitly intended to bring a more parliamentary style of governance to a constitutional structure that was clearly designed to prevent such a concentration of power. As part of this vision, the report specifically called for the abolition of the Senate filibuster and the replacement of the electoral college with a system of direct popular vote. These two measures were not only consistent with the report's majoritarian ethos, they were actually integral to the plan's success.

At the time of its publication, the report was especially appealing to liberals who felt that their policy proposals had widespread popularity but were stymied by an overly complex and arbitrary system of legislative veto points and a bizarre coalition structure that empowered conservatives far beyond their real societal base. The committee's members and staff were entirely aware that the result of their program would be to enhance the capacity of a left-of-center political party to carry through a program of welfare state construction and national state-building. Stronger parties would also enable the federal government to be more effective in imposing a national civil rights policy over intransigent resistance in the south of the United

States. The political complexion of this report, then, was decidedly (although not explicitly) liberal – a point which conservative critics made at the time and on many occasions since.⁷

The New Critique of Party Government

Since the report was written, much has of course changed in American politics. Most obviously, the two political parties have become far more ideologically cohesive and distinct, and the level of party unity in Congress has risen dramatically. Partisan polarization has increased dramatically, largely in response to the normalization of Southern politics and the alignment of the southern branches of each party with the rest of the party nationwide.⁸ Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats are now close to endangered species in their respective parties. The claim of the new critics of RPG is that the current polarization constitutes a fulfillment of a key part of the RPG program; namely, party coherence and distinctiveness. A kind of natural political experiment was undertaken over recent decades, and we can now see the results. We are in a

⁷See Evron M. Kirkpatrick, “‘Toward A More Responsible Two-Party System’: Political Science, Policy Science, or Pseudo-Science?” *American Political Science Review* (1971). Vol. 65: 965-990 and the introduction by Sidney Pearson in the 2004 edition of Schattschneider, *Party Government*.

⁸The literature is enormous, but among the best discussions are Barbara Sinclair, *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policy Making* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2006) and Pietro S. Nivola and David Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation, Volume I: Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2006) and Pietro S. Nivola and David Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation, Volume II: Consequences and Corrections of America’s Polarized Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2008).

unique position, therefore, to render a judgment on the validity of the APSA report and other RPG theories.

The main claim of the critics of RPG is that the current state of American politics is a case of good intentions gone awry. Well-meaning college professors came up with a plan to bring neatness and order to American political system, and to the extent that the plan was implemented, bad consequences have ensued. Morris Fiorina writes: “Some of the best political science minds of the 1930s and 1940s proposed a plan to improve American democracy. Whether as a direct result of the power of their case or not, much of that plan has been implemented. But the result is not what the committee might have anticipated.”⁹ According to Fiorina, the onset of more responsible parties has coincided with, and probably helped to cause, a growing popular distrust of government and politicians, and a corresponding decline in voting and other forms of participation. A common phrase found in such critiques is the old chestnut, “Be careful what you wish for, because you might get it.” Nicol C. Rae actually uses this phrase as the title of a long article that describes the “rise of responsible parties in American national politics,” and sees a growth in “potentially unhealthy side effects – partisan rancor, political polarization, [and] policy stasis in a separated national governing system.”¹⁰ Berkeley political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson use the phrase as well, noting that the “effects [of party polarization] have not

⁹Morris Fiorina, “Parties, Participation, and Representation in America: Old Theories Face New Realities,” presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (online at: <http://www.stanford.edu/~mfiorina/Fiorina%20Web%20Files/Fiorina%20SOD.pdf>).

¹⁰Nicol C. Rae, “Be Careful What You Wish For: The Rise of Responsible Parties in American National Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (2007:10): 179-191.

resembled the happy consequences the committee confidently forecast.”¹¹ Rather than thoughtful deliberation and good policymaking, the growth of polarized parties has produced “relentless partisan warfare and a governing party committed to extreme policy ends.”¹² The well-known Washington journalist Ronald Brownstein also notes that the “most appropriate” lesson to draw from the current state of the parties is to “beware of what you wish for.”¹³ At the end of a comprehensive account of American party politics over the last century, he concludes:

Our modern system of hyperpartisanship has unnecessarily inflamed our differences and impeded progress against our most pressing challenges. We are divided over every major decision we face at home and abroad. In Washington the political debate too often careens between dysfunctional poles: either polarization, when one party imposes its will over the bitter resistance of the other, or immobilization, when the parties fight to stalemate. Either result is a recipe for alienation in large parts of the public. Our political system has virtually lost its capacity to formulate the principled compromises indispensable for progress in any diverse society. By any measure, the costs of hyperpartisanship vastly exceed the benefits.¹⁴

These authors, and many others, base their conclusions on the claim that the APSA program of responsible party government has been in large part implemented, and that the result has been clearly detrimental to American democracy. They claim that partisan polarization has had the following negative effects: 1) During *unified* government, it had led to extremist policymaking. The main example is during the administration of George W. Bush, when according

¹¹Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 186.

¹²Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, p. 186.

¹³Ronald Brownstein, *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America* (New York: Penguin, 2007), p. 367.

¹⁴Brownstein, *Second Civil War*, p. 367.

to the critics, the administration and the Republican Congress were able to push policy to the far-right, thus generating “off-center” policy outcomes that were far from the preference of the median voter. This imposition of extreme policy angers the out-party, in turn fueling further extremism and widespread public discontent; 2) Especially under *unified* government, Congress has become a weak and ineffective body, thoroughly incapable of deliberating in a thoughtful fashion over legislation, protecting its power vis-a-vis the executive, or in engaging in effective oversight; 3) Special interests have gained greater power as they have been able to take advantage of the decline of the regular legislative order in Congress to cut deals in private with top party leaders – deals that would be less likely in a slower, more deliberative and decentralized process; 4) During periods of *divided* government, policymaking becomes prone to deadlock, as bipartisan compromises are extremely difficult to negotiate, especially given the 60-vote requirement to end a filibuster in the Senate and the generally minoritarian character of that body; and, 5) Political discourse in Washington and the rest of the country has become loud, nasty, and brutish, resulting in growing public disaffection and distrust. In summary, we have bad government, producing little legislation in the public interest, and this result is mostly traceable to the impact of polarized parties. With less polarized parties, we would have had better policymaking, and better politics.

For all these reasons, the critics conclude that the APSA report, and the claims of other RPG advocates, have been proven to be wrong, and the logic of the report’s recommendations undermined. The new task for political scientists, therefore, is not to strengthen parties, but rather to *contain* them, either by devising means to make them more moderate or by constraining their ferocity through new systems of checks and balances. To achieve greater moderation, some

have advocated changes in electoral rules, such as non-partisan redistricting to encourage competitive districts – expected to be more likely to elect moderate candidates – and open primaries in which the participation of a wider range of voters may generate more centrist party nominees.¹⁵ Other authors have gone so far as to advocate measures to encourage divided government, claiming that unified party government is so damaging and dangerous under current conditions that it is best avoided altogether. For example, law professors Daryl Levinson and Richard Pildes believe that states should eliminate ballot designs that facilitate straight-ticket voting, either through a party-column ballot or the use of a single ballot mark to vote for the entire party ticket.¹⁶ Many critics now also advocates changes in the internal rules of Congress to reduce the power of party leaders – essentially a rollback of much of the legislative changes of the last forty years. The seniority system could be embraced once more, thus strengthening the capacity committee chairs to resist partisan pressure.¹⁷ More generally, the regular order for consideration of legislation, involving extensive committee hearings, authentic floor discussion, and genuinely deliberative and bipartisan conference committees, could be restored. While this might reduce the total volume of legislation, it would allow a wider range of voices to be heard in

¹⁵See Brownstein, *Second Civil War*, pp. 378-380 and Pietro S. Nivola and William A. Galston, “Toward Depolarization,” in Nivola and Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation, Vol. II*.

¹⁶Daryl Levinson and Richard Pildes, “Separation of Parties, Not Powers,” *Harvard Law Review* (May 2006).

¹⁷*Ibid.*

the legislative process, reduce special interest influence, and bring policy closer in line with the preferences of the median voter.¹⁸

In the event that such measures do not bring about more moderate parties, critics have also encouraged the adoption of checking techniques used in parliamentary systems, such as an official “question time” in which the president would appear before Congress for questioning by members of the opposition party, and other kinds of rights for the opposition, such as super-majority rules (including use of the filibuster for judicial appointments) and the right of the minority party to initiate investigations and utilize the subpoena power. Finally, some have sought to increase the political resources of voters in the middle of the political spectrum, by strengthening labor unions, increasing turnout through easier voter registration and a reduced frequency of elections, campaign finance reform, restoration of the Fairness Doctrine for broadcast media, use of the internet to facilitate political action by ordinary citizens, and perhaps even the formation of a centrist third party.¹⁹

The common thread of all such reforms is the goal of getting *away* from partisanship, especially coherent partisanship based on strong ideological commitment. Given the long the history of support for stronger parties by American political scientists of a liberal bent, it is

¹⁸Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing and How to Get It Back on Track* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 231-234; Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, pp. 221-222; Brownstein, *Second Civil War*, 381.

¹⁹For various packages of these kinds of reforms, see Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, pp. 193-222 and Brownstein, *Second Civil War*, pp. 365-388.

remarkable to find prominent liberal law professors like Levinson and Pildes arguing in 2006 (in the *Harvard Law Review*, no less) that we should embrace reforms explicitly intended to prevent unified government by “fragmenting or moderating political parties.”²⁰ Equally remarkable is to find comparably liberal political scientists like Hacker and Pierson concocting plans (at least as of 2005) to weaken party discipline through open primaries and new protections for the minority party in Congress (including a *two-thirds* vote requirement before Congress could waive the regular legislative order). Hacker and Pierson flat out conclude that a “strong party system” has contributed markedly to a “growing concentration of economic and political resources” that has “left ordinary voters with limited sway over our nation’s course.”²¹ The APSA report, in their view, should now be seen as offering only a “cautionary tale” of what *not* to do, and in response to the current situation they advocate a return to the preoccupation with the separation of the branches that animated the original framers of the Constitution.²² We have come a long way, then, from the mid-twentieth century embrace of party government by liberal Democrats interested in constructing a comprehensive and coherent welfare state by *undoing* what the Framers had wrought.²³ But before we start dismantling the various mechanisms of partisanship in contemporary politics, we should perhaps ask: Does the argument against stronger partisanship really hold up?

²⁰Levinson and Pildes, “Separation of Parties.”

²¹Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, pp. 187-188.

²²See Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, pp. 222-223.

²³These views are comprehensively discussed in Austin Ranney, *The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government: Its Origins and Present State* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954).

Problems of the New Critique

The new criticisms of party government have become quite popular, purporting to offer a wise critique of impractical reformers who did not properly anticipate the unintended effects of their proposed changes. Unfortunately, a rather smug and dismissive tone has crept into much of this commentary, as mid-century political scientists are portrayed as naive and misguided theorists who should never have departed from the wisdom of the Founding Fathers. The tired concept of the “unintended consequences” of political action, so often used as a conservative justification for dismissing all proposals for reforms (while safely ignoring the various unintended results of *inaction*), is now hauled out once again to attack the supporters of responsible party government. I will argue, however, that the new critiques are anything but convincing.

First, it should be noted that the current system of partisan polarization is far from a complete fulfillment of the RPG vision of partisanship, and therefore cannot be seen as a comprehensive test of this model. Critics are quick to claim that the APSA version of RPG has been largely implemented. Fiorina impractical that the “committee was quite successful” and that “they seem to have done rather well.”²⁴ Brownstein claims that “we live in the political world the committee imagined” and that “the practice of American politics has followed the direction that the committee urged.”²⁵ Hacker and Pierson conclude “much of what the report demanded did in

²⁴Fiorina, “Parties, Participation, and Representation in America,” p. 13.

²⁵Brownstein, *Second Civil War*, p. 365 and 367.

fact come to pass.”²⁶ While it is indeed true that the parties are now more ideologically distinctive, unified, and disciplined, it is also the case that significant parts of the APSA program have not been implemented. I have previously noted that RPG theorists had a very comprehensive program centered around majority rule and clear accountability. To achieve this, they advocated the construction of large national party organizations that could set out a clear party platform, recruit candidates, and organize campaigns. A new system of dues-paying membership would be established, and the national organizations would use these monies to wage clearly *partisan*, not candidate-centered, campaigns across the entire country. Voters would be provided a good deal of information about each party’s policy commitments, and would comprehend that the partisan affiliation of candidates would necessarily be crucial in their voting decisions. Voters would know exactly what they were getting, and candidates would not be able to run away from or otherwise obfuscate their party identification. This system would allow for both responsibility and transparency. But this is clearly *not* what we have now. At present, we still have fairly weak and uncoordinated national party organizations, a good deal of local variation in the nature of party appeals, and mainly candidate-centered campaigns. Candidates generally do not emphasize their partisanship in general election campaigns, and do not run on the basis of their fealty to a worked-out party program (naturally, since once does not exist). While voters may be becoming more efficient at discerning the implications of partisanship, we are still some distance from the original RPG model of primarily partisan and programmatic campaigning.

²⁶Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, p. 186.

Additionally, the APSA report embraced markedly majoritarian changes in the rules of American politics. The filibuster would be eliminated, and the electoral college replaced with a system of national popular election. Without such reforms, the APSA authors realized, stronger parties might indeed have negative and indeed unintended effects. It was obvious that more disciplined parties combined with minority veto systems like the filibuster (with a two-thirds cloture vote in 1950) could exacerbate deadlock. That is why the report advocated simple majority rule in the Senate. Likewise, the threat to democracy posed by the possibility of the electoral college producing a winner with a minority of the popular vote (as occurred in 2000) is compounded if that winner can use party discipline to push a strong program that has not been endorsed by the people. The solution they embraced, however, was not to weaken parties, but to eliminate the electoral college altogether.²⁷ The report also advocated four-year terms for members of the House of Representatives, which would also lessen the possibility of divided government introduced at mid-term elections (as occurred in 1994 and 2006). There was, it appears, a coherence to the APSA program that many contemporary critics have overlooked.

In this regard, it is interesting to contemplate how American politics might have played out over the last decade if the full APSA program had been implemented, not just a fraction of it. In the absence of the electoral college system, George W. Bush would in all probability not have been elected president in 2000. Perhaps with more clearly partisan campaigning, the Democrats

²⁷Interestingly, Hacker and Pierson advocate the elimination of the electoral college, but fail to note that this was a crucial link in the APSA program that was never implemented. The report also supported weekend voting and other reforms to encourage turnout, just as Hacker and Pierson propose.

would have gotten more credit for the benign economic and social conditions prevailing in 2000, thus gaining congressional majorities (or at least increased numbers) in Congress that would in turn provide a solid basis for governance by a President Al Gore. Policymaking by the Democratic party would have been facilitated by the lack of a super-majority vote requirement in the Senate, leading to policy outcomes that were closer to median voter preferences. In this scenario, the worst things produced by partisan polarization, namely, the supposedly off-center, right-wing policies of the Bush administration, would have never occurred. From the RPG perspective, the problem in 2000 was not excessively strong partisanship, but rather the persistence of minoritarian features of the American political system that have undermined the proper expression of the popular will. The solution, therefore, is not to end partisanship, but to fulfill it by ending the filibuster and abolishing the electoral college. To castigate the APSA report when key parts of its reform program have not been implemented is not a solid critique.

Second, it is rather astonishing how many papers, books, and articles have been written that generalize from a rather brief period of time (no more than a decade, and often just a few years), and a very distinctive (arguably peculiar) version of partisan governance, to construct strong claims about the essential character of party government for the foreseeable future. The prestige (albeit limited) of political science has been put forth to argue that there is a *scientific* understanding of partisan polarization that is powerful enough to justify – even mandate – major reforms to dismantle stronger parties. Yet all such ruminations were based on either the case of the late-Clinton era of divided government with Democrats in control of the executive, or the Bush era of unified Republican government. Other possible constellations, such as divided

government with a Republican president or unified government under the Democrats, had not been experienced when contemporary critics decided it was time to write off the very idea of responsible party government. But on the face of it, it is entirely plausible that the problems that emerged during the specified periods reflect certain features of the Republican party coalition and leadership at that time, and would not necessarily tell us a whole lot about the possible productivity, accountability, and effectiveness of a period of Democratic party rule.

To advocate major changes in American nominating processes, congressional procedures, and electoral rules in order to undermine party-based governance on the basis of this very short period of time and skewed sample is rash and presumptive. It is hard not to believe that much of this advice was based on a latent fear by liberal Democrats that their party would not regain a congressional majority or control of the presidency for many years or decades to come (a palpable fear among liberals in the period immediately following the 2004 election). Having lost faith in the capacity of the electorate to ever hold the Republican majority accountable at the ballot box, these liberals turned to the idea of electoral and procedural reforms to compensate for their political failures. Hacker and Pierson thus argued in 2005 that what the US had was “*irresponsible* party government” that allowed the ruling party to act “with the impunity that comes when such actions are not disciplined by accountability.”²⁸ Rarely has a political prediction been more quickly falsified. These liberals had simply suffered a loss of faith in the American people and the democratic process. In fact, the voters were more aware than the liberals gave them credit for, and imposed severe sanctions on the ruling party in 2006 and 2008. The

²⁸Hacker and Pierson, p. 187.

outcomes in these elections were *exactly* what RPG theorists would predict would happen. The off-center and incompetent governance of the ruling party (which dominated all three branches of government) was easily recognized by the people, and they took decisive action against it. This outcome strongly supports the RPG model of how government should work, and radically undermines the critics of polarized partisanship who saw Republican governance as somehow beyond popular accountability. In short, events after 2005 have rendered ridiculous the somewhat hysterical jeremiads against party government that were published at that time. These authors succumbed to a rush to judgment that had little foundation in political science.

Third, the evaluative claims that academics and others have made about the quality of legislation during the recent period of polarized parties are extremely difficult to evaluate in a systematic and objective way. In *The Broken Branch*, published in 2006, Mann and Ornstein argue that a decline in the old style of lawmaking and its replacement by virulent partisanship has produced bad legislation: “bad process leads to bad policy – and often can lead to bad behavior, including ethical lapses.”²⁹ The authors point to the passage of the 2001 federal tax cuts, the Medicare prescription drug bill of 2003, the bankruptcy bill of 2005, and the authorization of the Iraq War as some of the more prominent examples of bad policy outcomes that are attributable to partisan polarization in Congress. It is not clear, however, that the litany of bad legislation during the Bush years is really markedly worse than, say, that produced during any five-year period chosen randomly from last century. Confusing, contradictory, and parochial legislation has been a characteristic problem of Congress from the beginning of the republic, and provided much of the

²⁹Mann and Ornstein, *Broken Branch*, p. 13.

motivation for the twentieth century expansion of presidential power and, in fact, the original ideas of the RPG reformers (see, for example, Woodrow Wilson's comments on the Congress of the 1880s).³⁰ While it is certainly possible that Congress produced a particularly long list of lousy legislation during the Bush era, it is not clear that this is unprecedented, or that it has its roots entirely or mostly in partisan polarization. Mann and Ornstein choose not to explore the possibility that these allegedly bad outcomes are not really due to partisan polarization *per se*, but just the Republican version of it. Who is to say that the Democratic version might not work much better? If so, the basis for making a lot of effort to dismantle partisanship is weak – a more logical response would be to simply change the party in power and see what happens. This is, in fact, what the electorate chose to do. The experiment is now under way.

During the height of the Bush administration in 2005, Mann and Ornstein were rather downbeat, concluding that “we are both convinced that the Congress we have observed and experienced in recent years is qualitatively different than its predecessors in important and dismaying ways.”³¹ They continue: “The unnecessarily partisan behavior of the House majority has poisoned the well enough to make any action to restrain the growth of entitlement programs and to restructure health care policy impossible...” Yet, by March 2009 we find Ornstein writing: “I remain optimistic that this Congress will end up pushing through an historic amount of ambitious legislation over the next two years...When we look back at the 111th Congress years

³⁰For Wilson's views, see Ranney, *Doctrine of Responsible Party Government*, Chapter Three.

³¹Mann and Ornstein, *Broken Branch*, p. 211.

from now, I believe there is a real chance we'll recall its truly impressive record of major legislative action and see that it rivaled the Congresses that ushered in both the New Deal and the Great Society."³² Apparently, in three years Congress has gone from a severely broken branch to one possessing the capability of producing legislation on the scale of the New Deal and Great Society. Yet, by all accounts (including the latest quantitative data), *partisan polarization has reached new heights*.³³ Perhaps it was never really the problem? Might it be that it was only the Republican version of polarization that was so prone to inanity? And why were political scientists so afraid to suggest this possibility, and to instead advocate reforms that, if implemented, would have only made future Democratic governance more difficult (by strengthening the obstructive capacity of congressional minorities)? I am not suggesting a hidden partisan agenda here, but rather a certain timidity and unwillingness to recognize the possibility that polarized partisanship might work much differently (and better) under Democratic unified government than it did under the Republican version. On face of it, this is an entirely logical hypothesis, but few political scientists or journalists embraced it (Democratic party activists did, naturally enough, but that is another story).

Similarly, claims about the damage wrought by declining congressional deliberation are extremely difficult to evaluate in any objective fashion. Was it really the case that deliberation was so much better in the Congresses of the past? Different, to be sure, but better? Was it really

³²Norman Ornstein, "Barack vs. The Hill," *The New Republic*, March 12, 2009 (online at: <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=cccd0352-5b55-48b0-adc0-95742d966db0>).

³³Nolan McCarty, "Polarization," blog posting, Dec. 24, 2008 (online at: <http://blogs.princeton.edu/mccarty/2008/12/polarization.html>).

better when dictatorial committee chairman blocked hearings altogether, often to protect an entrenched system of racist privilege in southern states? Or when Senator Joe McCarthy was launching a modern-day inquisition against alleged communists? Was that a golden age of informed thoughtful discussion? During the period now hailed as the highpoint of an effective Congress, Ralph Nader also wrote a book called *The Broken Branch*, portraying Congress as dominated by special interests and mediocre leadership. This has been a constant in most evaluations of Congress. While the new critics of RPG are long on rosy reminiscences of the good old days on Capitol Hill in the 1950s and 1960s, they are characteristically silent on just why it was that so many at that time, especially on the left, found Congress to be anything but an idol of wise deliberation. The Congress that we are supposed to admire as superior to current arrangements is the same one that fostered a gigantic and classic literature on “iron triangles,” “sub-governments,” and “particularized benefits.” Contrary to the critics, perhaps the current problems in Congress will eventually be seen as merely growing pains in the emergence of a new system of more centralized and partisan legislating that, while far from perfect, will come to be viewed as a clearly superior alternative to the system which prevailed in the Congress of mid-century America. At a minimum, this interpretation is just as convincing as the idea that all is woe and that Congressional rule changes need to be aimed, first and foremost, at recreating the legislative relationships of some four decades ago.

Fourth, it is entirely possible to dispute just how far off-center policymaking was during the George W. Bush presidency. In truth, the pattern of policymaking during the Bush years does not suggest a party with fifty percent plus one of the electorate implementing its entire agenda

without regard to the consequences.³⁴ Actually, fear of anticipated reactions in upcoming elections prevented Republicans from changing a single thing in Social Security, or in dismantling welfare state programs of any type (rather, the story was one of expansion, albeit in a fashion quite favorable to GOP-supported economic groupings). In these areas, at least, most off-center impulses were ultimately constrained by fear of future actions by the electorate. To the extent this claim is true, it supports RPG theory, not those who would attempt to dismantle or undermine the emerging system of party government.

Obviously, if Congress is responsive to popular opinion even under polarized partisanship, the power of the president to push an off-center program through Congress is also correspondingly diminished. George W. Bush encountered this dynamic in his efforts to achieve social security reform and immigration reform – both were rejected by his alleged partisan foot-soldiers on Capitol Hill. While the claim of increased presidential power under conditions of unified government is likely to have some validity, the Bush administration was hardly unconstrained, and this experience could in any case just as easily be an anomaly. In short, the argument that partisan polarization by itself drastically increases presidential power on a systematic and long-term basis is still debatable. It should be recalled that the APSA report and most other RPG advocates actually saw stronger parties as a way to *contain* and discipline presidential power, not as a way to enhance the arbitrary authority of one man. Schattschneider noted: “...only when the national parties are strong enough to dominate Congress will that body

³⁴For similar conclusions, see David W. Brady, John Ferejohn, and Laurel Harbridge, “Polarization and Public Policy: A General Assessment,” in Pietro S. Nivola and William A. Galston, “Toward Depolarization,” in Nivola and Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation, Vol. II*.

discover and exploit the public issues so effectively that the presidency will cease to be the sole rallying point of the great public interests of the country. In fact, a tendency toward a presidential dictatorship can be dissolved in a strong national party system of leadership, because political responsibility is more flexible, comprehensive, and powerful than the system of legal responsibility set up by the separation of powers.”³⁵ Let us see how several more presidencies fare under this new system of partisan politics before we jump to the conclusion that partisan polarization inevitably creates imperial presidents. The early indicators of considerable autonomy on the part of House and Senate Democratic leaders during the Obama presidency suggests that a more consultative and interactive mode of presidential leadership – still based, yes, upon strong partisanship – may be entirely possible under conditions of polarized partisanship.

One last point needs to be made about the new critiques of RPG theory. Many of these critiques claim to defend an earlier approach to governing in which a slow process of discussion, deliberation, and bargaining brings about a widespread consensus, both in Congress and the attentive public, before a particular policy change is enacted. As one traditional defender of party politics puts it, “The process is designed to maximize the opportunities for criticism, for fresh ideas and insights, and for achieving a result that will receive the widest possible acceptance.”³⁶ From this perspective, polarized partisanship, and RPG systems more generally, are seen as flawed, because they bring about policy changes too quickly, short-circuiting a process of

³⁵Schattschneider, *Party Government*, p. 210.

³⁶J. Roland Pennock, “Responsiveness, Responsibility, and Majority Rule,” *American Political Science Review* (1952), Vol. 46: 790-807.

deliberation that is needed both to improve the quality of policy and to ensure that sufficient public support exists to make the policy effective and stable in the long run. While all this sounds reasonable, it is never quite shown that this is how the public policy process actually works. One might want it to work this way, but many things in democracy work rather differently than we would like. It seems entirely possible that another model of policymaking, one which we might call the “elitist decision/mass confirmation” model, is equally convincing. In this model, the public knows little about policy, but does have a sense of unmet needs that could be addressed by better policy. Various policy entrepreneurs attempt to get their policy enacted, and eventually do so by various means, but a widespread societal consensus is never generated. Eventually, if the policy is successful and wins public support, people say retrospectively that there was a “consensus” behind it; if it fails, people say there never was a consensus, and that is why it failed. In this view, policy derives from various sources (to a large extent the machinations of various elites), and is rarely or never the product of a true democratic consensus as described in the civics textbook version of American politics. Obviously, both of these models are oversimplifications, and require empirical confirmation or refinement. There is no doubt a literature in public policy that explores the processes of policy initiation and enactment, and may shed light on the extent to which consensus model actually has any validity. But my point here is simply that the academic and popular commentary critical of both polarized partisanship and RPG theory never actually presents any evidence that a slow, fragmented, and delayed process of policymaking actually generates any more public consensus or improved policy than a quick majoritarian strike via party discipline. In the absence of such evidence, the argument for a go-slow approach to policymaking often seems little more than an argument for conservatism and the status quo. Ironically, critics of

RPG often accuse its supporters of being academic idealists who value ideological purity over practical results, yet their own embrace of a consensus model seems equally based on an idealistic, perhaps even naive, view of how the policymaking process works.

The multiplication of veto points in the American political system is often presented by RPG critics as simply a way of safeguarding democracy and securing widespread support for policy change, but systematic delay is often far from innocent in its political implications. The best way to stop anything from happening may be not to oppose it, but simply to say that it must be studied and debated until a strong consensus emerges. Sometimes such delay and deliberation does lead to real change, but in many cases it is simply a means to block new policy. In this sense, the critics of polarized partisanship, especially under unified government, often seem to be motivated by their own agenda of opposing major shifts in public policy (either to the left *or* right). Brownstein, Mann and Ornstein, and many other critics are entirely open in their description of themselves as centrists or moderates. In this respect, their critique of RPG can be seen as a statement of the political strategy of contemporary centrists, just as the APSA reports and other statements of RPG were expressions of mid-century New Deal liberalism. This is all perfectly appropriate, and these authors do not conceal their aims, but there is no particular reason that those who are further to the left or right will necessarily feel compelled to support a set of political arrangements that are biased so strongly in favor of the status quo and incremental change.

Conclusion

The antipathy to the emergence of polarized partisanship has far outrun any grounding in confirmed knowledge. Ironically, this problem is identical to the most-cited difficulty with the APSA report of 1950, namely, that it made strong claims for the desirability of stronger partisanship on the basis of a rather weak body of confirmed social science knowledge. As a large literature in the 1950s convincingly demonstrated, the report was not very impressive as political science, containing numerous unsupported assumptions and dubious claims.³⁷ As a statement of liberal political strategy, however, it had much to recommend it, and in this respect it has proved prescient in many respects. The current attacks on RPG are no different: as statements of centrist political strategy, they may well be valuable. But they have no stronger scientific basis than did the APSA report and other mid-century works advocating responsible party government. All such doctrines about the role of parties are, I would suggest, inextricably tied to political values and political judgments, and ultimately to issues of personal temperament, intuition, and psychological willingness to accept risk. Those on the left and right who seek major change will continue to gravitate towards political parties as a means for taking hold of government and altering its direction. Those who feel that the status quo is basically acceptable, requiring only incremental adjustment, will continue to find “scientific” arguments for why their views are sound

³⁷See Kirkpatrick, “‘Toward A More Responsible Two-Party System’: Political Science, Policy Science, or Pseudo-Science?” and Austin Ranney, “Toward A More Responsible Two-Party System: A Commentary,” *American Political Science Review* (1951). Vol. 45: 488-499.

(in contrast to the “ideological” extremism of their critics). And so, the debate over party government continues.