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The disturbing dance of polarization, inequality

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Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches

By Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal

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The term "polarization" has been used ad nauseam by pundits and journalists in recent years to describe the contemporary landscape of American politics. Used in this context, polarization refers to a growing ideological divide within the mass public, and it has become synonymous with terms like "culture war" and "blue versus red states." Yet studies of polarization are often anecdotal in nature and loaded with partisan rhetoric, quick to blame this or that group while lacking in systematic analysis and useful policy prescriptions.

"Polarized America" by Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, political scientists at Princeton University, the University of California at San Diego and New York University respectively, is a breath of fresh air. Poole and Rosenthal have been the academic leaders in the study of political polarization for more than two decades; McCarty, their doctoral student in the early 1990s, is a leading scholar of his generation. Moving beyond partisan political rhetoric, the authors conduct a rigorous social scientific analysis of polarization, examining its causes and its consequences. They have produced a book that will guide and inform the study of polarization for decades to come.

The authors analyze polarization within the confines of Congress. They first use a procedure to generate measures of ideology for all members of Congress, using roll-call voting decisions as the inputs. Polarization is then defined as the ideological distance between the average members (or the middle) of each party. If Democrats move left (become more liberal) and Republicans move right (become more conservative), for example, then polarization increases. Likewise, if Democrats and Republicans moderate, and move toward the center, then polarization decreases.

Empirically, the authors find that polarization declined steadily for much of the 20th Century, a drop that began just before World War I, only to reach a trough in the early 1970s. By the late 1970s, polarization began to increase. This rise has been consistent and dramatic through the present day and has resulted from Republicans moving sharply right and Democrats slightly left.

To account for this increase in polarization, the authors first examine traditional explanations--such as the Southern realignment in the 1960s and 1970s, partisan reforms in Congress in the 1970s, the increase in partisan gerrymandering in recent decades and the rise of restrictive primary laws--but find little empirical support.

Then they examine two macroeconomic factors--trends in income inequality and changes in immigration--and find a strong relationship to polarization in Congress. This represents the "dance" over the last three decades, as polarization, income inequality and immigration have moved in unison, causing and affecting one another.

Since 1970, income inequality--measured in several ways, but mainly by the gap between the rich and poor--has increased significantly. Moreover, citizens have increasingly used their economic interests as the guiding force in their voting decisions. This has been the case especially among social conservatives, a result that is contrary to anecdotal accounts like Thomas Frank's "What's the Matter With Kansas?".

This rise in pocketbook voting has allowed the Republicans to move right and stay right. Because middle-class voters are still benefiting in relative-income terms from the post-World War II economic boom, they have not demanded more redistributive policies and have not chafed at Republican efforts to oppose minimum-wage increases, eliminate estate taxes and reduce marginal tax rates.

Hand-in-hand with this rise in income inequality is the rise in the nation's foreign-born population over the past three decades. Most of these immigrants are poor and non-citizens. They increase income inequality by taking low-paying jobs and helping to promote economic growth, but they are unable to vote and thus demand greater redistribution. As a result, the bottom of the nation's income distribution has less of a voice in representative politics.

In order for this increasing trend in polarization to reverse, McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal suggest that a "reordering of the current system" is necessary. This reordering could be accomplished in several ways. For example, the Republicans could become too extreme on social issues, which might lead the party's secular voters to jump ship. The Republicans could also become too libertarian on economic issues, which might turn off the party's socially conservative wing. The Democrats could become more aggressive at courting socially conservative middle-class voters, a group that seems increasingly up for grabs. And a serious macro-level shock, like a significant economic downturn or another terrorist attack, could force voters to reassess their partisan attachments.

These possibilities aside, however, the authors note that polarization, as a major national problem, has not arisen overnight. Thus, "[t]he end of polarization and, as well, economic inequality, should be a process measured not in months or years but in decades." How all of this plays out is anyone's guess.